

SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE



3 2449 0425979 F



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2010 with funding from  
Lyrasis Members and Sloan Foundation

<http://www.archive.org/details/angelincagestudy00jens>





# Angel in a Cage

## A Study of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Marriage-Plot Novels of England and America

A Senior Honors Thesis in the Department of English

Sweet Briar College

By Jamie Lynn Jensen

Defended and Approved with High Honors

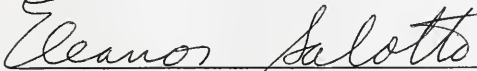
20 April 2004



Professor Marcia Robertson

4-20-04

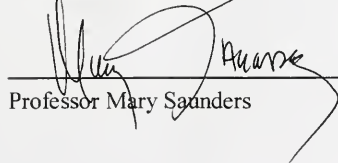
date



Professor Eleanor Salotto

4-20-04

date



Professor Mary Saunders

4-20-04

date



## General Introduction

The tradition of the nineteenth-century marriage-plot novel in both England and America works to liberate women from their powerless socially prescribed roles. Marriage-plot novelists generally portray the status quo women's roles in ways that illuminate problematic or unjust aspects of those roles, and their critiques range from conservative to scandalous. The more conservative critics may propose revisions to the status quo within their novels and attempt to justify why those revisions are beneficial and necessary. However, subsequent marriage-plot novelists raise issues that their predecessors fail to address, thus making the previous solutions inadequate. For example, Jane Austen attempts to redefine women's narrow and oppressive roles in a way that society can accommodate. However, the landscape of Austen's novels does not incorporate the possibility of women holding a career or of defining themselves in a way apart from what mainstream society accepts, both of which are issues that later marriage-plot novelists address. Yet, as marriage-plot novelists continue to raise issues neglected by their predecessors, finding a solution within current social limitations becomes increasingly impossible.

The "angel in the house" ideology, a foundation of the social structure of the nineteenth century, defined women's space as only the home and nowhere else. Restricting women to the home turned the home into a cage, and to liberate women from their oppressive roles, it became necessary to define a space for them outside the home. However, the nineteenth-century social structure was so dependent on women remaining in the home that to allow them outside their cage would be disastrous to the social order.



Therefore, as marriage-plot novelists continued to raise problems with the status quo women's roles, proposing a feasible solution soon became a fruitless endeavor. The more radical marriage-plot novelists probably realized that they would not see the issues resolved in their lifetime and instead focused on something they could accomplish within their lifetime: liberating women's souls.

For this study, I will focus on three authors' work from England and one from America, chosen to represent conservative, intermediate, and radical positions. The novels I will study are Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as her *Mansfield Park*; Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. In addition, I will include a brief discussion of Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*. Austen's works and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* are noteworthy for initiating serious social critique on women's status in society, but compared to the other novelists I consider their critiques to be conservative. By "conservative," I mean that neither Austen nor Fern wishes to drastically upset the status quo of her time. *Jane Eyre* offers a more substantial critique of women's social status, and *Wuthering Heights* and *The Awakening* are extreme critiques that involve complex and controversial implications. These latter two works raise so many social problems that no solution appears possible within the landscape of the novels, as opposed to Austen who attempts to find a middle ground in which her heroines gain some liberties but must make some sacrifices to maintain social order. *Wuthering Heights* and *The Awakening*, on the other hand, end in crisis on a social plane, but the heroines reach a level of spiritual freedom not even conceived in less radical works.



## Introduction to the English Novels

As the literary climate of the nineteenth century differed in England and America, I shall group my discussion of these novels by country. To preface my study of the English novels, however, I shall introduce the important movements occurring in England at the time and the concepts that I will highlight with respect to *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*.

### THE ENLIGHTENMENT

\* \* \* \* \*

Flourishing in the eighteenth century but still holding influence in the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment promoted the use of logical reasoning to combat authoritarian power. Absolute monarchy and (in France) the Catholic Church were the primary targets. As “logic alone could be used to defend all sorts of absurd notions[,] ... Enlightenment thinkers insisted on combining it with something they called ‘reason’ which consisted of common sense, observation, and their own unacknowledged prejudices in favor of skepticism and freedom” (Brians). Thus, Enlightenment thought draws from natural law—an ethical theory promoting objective, logic-derived moral truth—and also relies on empirical evidence (Himma). It is responsible for a gradual shift from a Europe of “community, authority, and tradition” to a Europe of “individualism, freedom and change” (Brians).

The Enlightenment also changed Europeans’ conception of God. Voltaire and Rousseau, two important Enlightenment writers, both were deists, which Webster’s



Encyclopedic Dictionary defines as “[o]ne who believes in the existence of a God or supreme being but denies revealed religion, basing his belief on the light of nature and reason” (“Deism Defined”). While Rousseau was uncomfortable with rejecting orthodox Christianity, Voltaire wrote forcefully against it attacking especially “the inspiration of the Bible, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, [and] the damnation of unbelievers” (Brians). These two men’s views of the divine reflect the larger conceptual shift from the traditional Christian God defined by the Bible to a more abstract concept of the divine as the embodiment of Reason.

Of the authors I’ve selected, the Enlightenment greatly influences Jane Austen. She emphasizes the use of reason in all her novels, especially *Pride and Prejudice*. Regarding morality in particular, Austen ascribes to the Enlightenment belief in natural law, maintaining that through proper use of reason, everyone will arrive at the same conclusions about the truth (Koppel 2-3). For Austen, “everyone” includes women as well as men—she argues that both sexes have equal access to the powers of reason. In this way she critiques the prior categorization, which associated men with the mind and women with the body. Women, it was thought, were so much bound to emotions and bodily functions such as menstruation that they could not have a mental capacity equal to men’s. Addressing this, Mary Poovey writes: “If women were not governed by reason (like men), but by something else, then they could hardly be expected (or allowed) to participate in the economic and political fray. Increasingly, from the late eighteenth century, the medical model of reproductive difference was invoked to define this something...” (11). To combat this mentality, feminist Enlightenment writers, including



Austen and others, argued that inadequate education, rather than biological limitation, was responsible for the discrepancy in intellect.

Mary Wollstonecraft made the first and most prominent Enlightenment argument for the equal intellectual capacity of men and women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She mocks the mindless deference that conduct books preach to women. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft insists that women are incapable of virtue unless they develop their mind and rely on reason. She states:

Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirise our headstrong passions and grovelling vices. Behold, I should answer, the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives. (23)

The biting sarcasm of this passage persists throughout the work. Wollstonecraft argues that women cannot be expected to be anything other than foolish and capricious if they are taught from infancy to resist developing their powers of reason, relying instead on men's judgement. She proceeds to say that all the virtues women appear to be



developing in their youth are contrived and they are actually trained to be “cunning, mean, and selfish” (157).

One of Wollstonecraft’s primary assertions is that women will better fulfill their roles of daughter, wife, and mother if better educated. She asks, “Do passive, indolent women make the best wives? ... And have women, who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to manage a family or raise children? So far from it...” (39). Later in the work, she states, “Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens” (162). Wollstonecraft undoubtedly knows that these are the arguments that have the best chance of winning her audience over, since she is reinforcing women’s current roles. However, occasionally Wollstonecraft suggests that women’s roles ought to extend beyond the domestic sphere. She points out the following flaw in the eighteenth-century social structure:

How women are to exist in that state where there is to be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, we are not told.—For though moralists have long agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that *man* is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, they constantly concur in advising *woman* only to provide for the present. (38)

Here Wollstonecraft hedges around the possibility of a valid role for women outside marriage. However, later she is so bold as to state, “How much more respectable is the woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling any duty than the most accomplished beauty!...” (163). Wollstonecraft does not develop this argument much, most likely



because she realized it would weaken her overall argument. Instead she tries to draw a direct correlation between women's independence and their ability to attain virtue. "It is vain," she states, "to expect virtue from women till they are, in some degree, independent of men; nay, it is vain to expect that strength of natural affection, which would make them good wives and mothers" (154). When she asserts that women's first duty, like men's, is to be rational creatures, she softens it by adding that their next most important duty is that of mother, and that reason must contribute to the proper fulfillment of the role of mother (159, 162). Wollstonecraft's argument for the improvement of women's rights and education must be subordinated to the importance of their social duties in order to be credible to her contemporaries.

*Vindication* was not well received by the public, however, and criticism grew even worse when, five months after Wollstonecraft's death in 1798, her widower William Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In it, Godwin reveals that his wife had relationship with another man, attempted suicide several times, conceived her daughter before marriage, and rejected Christianity. Although Godwin did not intend to censure his wife, the public certainly did not hesitate to do so. Richard Polwhele wrote a poem entitled *The Unsex'd Females* the same year, targeting Wollstonecraft and her friend Mary Hays who spoke in her defense. Any female thought to defend Wollstonecraft or sympathize with her ideas was likewise in danger of personal attack. Consequently, female social critics publishing after 1798 had to take particular care not to connect themselves in any way to Wollstonecraft's ideology. Margaret Kirkham cites this to explain the extreme caution with which women writers approached the topic of female education in the years following the scandal. She writes,



“There is no reason to suppose that, had the Wollstonecraft scandal not occurred, women like Edgeworth and More would have written on feminist subjects in the same spirit as Wollstonecraft, but I doubt they would have needed to display their acceptance of social restrictions upon women quite so ostentatiously” (49-50).

Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* carries many of the same arguments as Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*. Elizabeth asserts to Mr. Collins that she is a “rational creature” and uses reason throughout the novel (91). Also, Austen illustrates in the character of Mrs. Bennet that lack of reason renders a woman incapable of performing her motherly duties. In the entailment of the Bennet property, Austen raises the issue that society allows no means for women to support themselves, should they not wish or be unable to marry. However, like Wollstonecraft, Austen does not place much emphasis on the issue.

Despite the striking similarities between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Vindication*, Austen enjoyed a much better public reception than Wollstonecraft. This may be because Austen’s social critique took the form of a novel, whereas Wollstonecraft’s was a political treatise. Or it may be due in part to the fact that *Pride and Prejudice* was published 15 years after the Wollstonecraft Scandal in 1798. Interestingly, Austen intended to publish an early version of *Pride and Prejudice*, titled *First Impressions* at the time, in 1797 (Kirkham 53). The publication, however, was not carried through. It would be pure speculation to suppose that the Wollstonecraft Scandal had anything to do with Austen changing her mind, but it does not seem an absurd possibility, given the personal attacks aimed at any woman resembling Wollstonecraft’s ideas. The insistence on women as rational creatures is a defining aspect of both Austen’s and Wollstonecraft’s



writing, and had Austen published *First Impressions* at the same time as Godwin's *Memoirs*, she would have been an obvious target for personal attack. The favorable reception of the *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813 reflects the advantage Austen received in delaying the novel's publication.

## ROMANTICISM

\* \* \* \* \*

The emphasis on reason in Austen and her fellow Enlightenment writers largely disappears in the Brontës' writing. Instead their work is woven with the sensuous descriptions and passionate outbursts associated with Romanticism. The Romantic Age of England is generally dated from the late eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century. "Poetry," writes Maurice Cranston, "is the art in which English romanticism found its best expression, if only because prose writers of the time remained for the most part creatures of the Enlightenment" (73). This is certainly true of Austen, although some critics attempt to treat her as a Romantic writer (Kelly). *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, both published in 1847, come after the great flowering of Romantic poetry, but the passion, spontaneity, and expressiveness of the Brontës' work clearly aligns them with Romantic writing.

"Romanticism," writes Paul Brians, "is the label for a literary-philosophical-artistic-musical-political movement which is often seen primarily as a rebellion against the stifling intellectualism and rigid logic of the Enlightenment, but it is much richer than that." It is commonly agreed that Romanticism cannot be defined, for it promotes individualism and innovation, causing Romantic works to vary widely. However, certain observations can be made about Romantic writing in general. It tends to promote



emotion over reason and subjective perspectives over so-called objective views. Also, Romantic writing often has a spontaneous quality of expression. It promotes rebellion over order and seclusion over society (Kitson).

One principal way in which Romanticism manifests itself in *Jane Eyre* is in Jane's passionate outbursts, both as a child and a grown woman, which allow Jane a form of sexual expression not available to Austen's heroines. Charlotte Brontë criticized Austen for not writing passionately, and it is easy to view Brontë's style as a "rebellion against the stifling intellectualism and rigid logic of the Enlightenment," as Brians puts it. However, on a closer examination, one can see that Jane often speaks very rationally and relies on discernment and sound judgement to guide her, just as Austen's heroines do. The rational vs. the passionate serves as the central conflict for Jane, as well as for Charlotte Brontë. Brontë tries to reconcile both aspects within Jane to give her both credibility and freedom of expression. However, the oppositional nature of reason and passion makes a complete reconciliation impossible. The warring of these two forces is responsible for the unsettled quality throughout the novel, which I will discuss in much more detail in the chapter on *Jane Eyre*.

Unlike her sister, Emily Brontë does not use reason to give her heroine in *Wuthering Heights* credibility. In fact, Catherine's most memorable speeches are irrational and use ill logic, such as her conversation with Nelly on why she has decided to accept Edgar Linton's marriage proposal. Catherine consequently does not war between two opposing forces like Jane. However, *Wuthering Heights* is still unsettled, albeit in a different way than *Jane Eyre*. Catherine is unsettled not because she is being pulled in two opposite directions inside, but because she is not at home in the nineteenth-century



mainstream social world that surrounds her, reflected in some of her most poignant and tragic speeches.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* also incorporate the Romantic qualities of rebellion and seclusion, the latter moreso than the former. Both Jane and Catherine live relatively secluded from society. They do not attend any dinner parties, which are common in Austen's writing. Even among their limited society, both Jane and Catherine value their time alone and enjoy taking walks by themselves. Both heroines are also rebellious of propriety to some degree. Jane makes some speeches to Rochester not befitting her social station, and she is certainly very rebellious as a child. Catherine's entire manner is a rebellion against propriety, as well as her ideas about love and marriage. Also, Catherine's self-inflicted starvation is her final and greatest act of rebellion against her social imprisonment.

Evident also in the Brontës' writing is another important concept in Romantic writing: the sublime. Edmund Burke, the first Romantic philosopher of England, writes of the sublime in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), describing it thus: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling." Although Burke uses negative words such as "pain," "danger," and "terrible," he associates the sublime with delight, "not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror." For Burke, however, the magnificence and delight of the sublime have nothing to do with beauty: "[S]ublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively



small: beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; ... beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive.” In general, then, the sublime is characterized by great magnitude, terror, and delight. It appears in Romantic literature in grand, sweeping, rugged landscapes and in tumultuous emotions, both of which appear plentifully in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

In addition to passionate speeches, rebellion, seclusion, and the sublime, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* participate in Romanticism as New Gothic literature. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, is considered the last Old Gothic English novel; New Gothic novels are considered to be those published after 1818, and in general they transfer the classic Gothic characteristics such as ruins, the supernatural, and victimization to the subtext of the novel (Salotto, ENGL 274). New Gothic novels rely on symbolism to convey their messages, which are often too controversial to state overtly. A defining aspect of the New Gothic novel, therefore, is repression and its consequences. These novels are not always set literally in ruined buildings, but often have themes of figurative ruin and decay resulting from some form of repression (Salotto). The Victorian Age was therefore well suited to New Gothic literature by virtue of its repression of female sexuality and selfhood.

Repression is overwhelmingly present in *Jane Eyre*, but the subordinating force acting on Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* is more precisely suppression. Whereas Jane self-polices her behavior, Catherine achieves a remarkable transcendence above self-subjection. Instead, Catherine is suppressed by the society functioning around her, and her realization that she does not belong in mainstream nineteenth-century society makes



her stifled existence that much more painful. The stifling force that Jane adopts subconsciously and that Catherine resists and can escape only through death takes the form of the “angel in the house” ideology.

### THE “ANGEL IN THE HOUSE”

\* \* \* \* \*

A major defining aspect of Victorian society was the “angel in the house” ideology. Mary Poovey discusses the development of this ideology in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*:

As late as the 1740s, woman was consistently represented as the site of willful sexuality and bodily appetite: ... women were associated with flesh, desire, and unsocialized, hence susceptible, impulses and passions. [T]he eighteenth century witnessed the gradual transformation of this sexualized image of woman as willful flesh into the domestic ideal.... In the process, woman became not some errant part of man, but his opposite, his moral hope and spiritual guide. (9-10)

The definition of women as wanton and morally corrupt in the eighteenth century and earlier stems from the blame laid on womankind for the Fall of Man in the Bible, which was reinforced in John Milton’s highly influential epic work *Paradise Lost*, first published in 1674. The reversal of women’s moral orientation through the eighteenth century and culminating in the nineteenth century owes a large part to the rise of capitalism.

In *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, Poovey discusses the role of capitalism in the development of the angel ideology:



The duties a woman fulfilled in the home directly supported capitalist values. For example, the sympathetic, nonjudgmental affection the ideal wife offered her husband helped offset the frustrations and strains a man suffered in his workplace and thus both contributed to the rewards associated with work and helped a man renew his energies for another day's labors. (10)

The new stresses that arose with the capitalism required a counteracting nurturing force at home where a man could recover from his arduous day and be ready for the next. This necessity transformed women's position into existing solely for man's pleasure and comfort. An angel in the house was supposed to listen patiently to her husband's complaints, understanding that they arose from the stress of a long day of work. And if she were unsatisfied with anything, she should remain quiet about it so as not to upset her already stressed husband. She would unquestioningly follow her husband's judgement, never thinking herself capable of settling a matter, and would never contradict his wishes or decisions.

As man's "moral hope and spiritual guide," an angel in the house was clearly defined in religious terms (Poovey, Uneven, 10). At the turn of the nineteenth century, England experienced a change in its religious climate. Methodism, an evangelical movement begun within the Church of England by John Wesley, broke away from the Established Church after Wesley's death in 1791 and quickly became a fiery reforming force (Gilmour 68-74). Although this was at the time that Austen was writing, her novels reflect the "tepidity" of the Established Church (67). Austen's novels, though often involving at least one minister character, are largely secular, often focusing on the social



aspect of religion rather than the theological aspect. That Austen lived before the full force of the angel in the house ideology helps to explain this.

The Brontë sisters, on the other hand, grew up with a minister father who was strongly influenced by both Methodism and Evangelicalism in the Church of England (Thormählen 13). Consequently, the angel in the house ideology takes the shape of Evangelical Christianity, particularly in *Jane Eyre*. The character of Helen Burns, Jane's strongest moral influence, is cast in specifically Evangelical terms and preaches Christian forbearance to young Jane. While the angel in the house ideology does not define the character of Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* to the same extent that it defines Jane Eyre, it still serves as the model to which Catherine is compared and found lacking, and it is still defined in Christian terms (Brontë, Emily, 80).

### INTELLECTUAL, MATERIAL, OR SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

\* \* \* \* \*

The different influences on Jane Austen and Charlotte and Emily Brontë direct these authors' concern toward different forms of liberation. Austen is concerned mostly with intellectual liberation and somewhat with material liberation, although she doesn't examine the latter in depth. Emily Brontë is concerned primarily with spiritual liberation, although she brings up some material issues. Charlotte Brontë is concerned heavily with both material and spiritual liberation, although spiritual liberation for her comes in specifically Christian terms, whereas for Emily Brontë it is areligious.

The primary social aim of Austen's novels is to assert equal intellectual capacity between men and women. Therefore, the primary form of liberation she argues for is intellectual. Particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*, the assertion of intellectual equality



comes in the form of witty banter. The heroine engages in a contest of wits under the guise of playfulness, and upon applying superior logic, proves not only that she can match the wits of her opponent, often a man, but actually that she surpasses his intellect. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny uses wit sometimes, but it is largely deemphasized. However, intellectual liberation is still a primary issue in the novel, as shown by Fanny's stubborn adherence to her own judgement of Mr. Crawford over filial duty regarding Sir Thomas's wishes.

The advancement of intellectual status, although not tangible, alters women's status in society. As Wollstonecraft argues in *Vindication*, if women have the capacity to learn the same things as men, they should receive the same education afforded men. Austen makes this same argument in her novels, education being an important underlying theme. Along with advancement of intellectual status will come advancement of a more material political status, so hope Wollstonecraft and Austen. For if an intellectual distinction cannot be made between the sexes, then a political distinction is no longer justified.

Austen also raises some issues of material liberation, but she does not fully pursue them. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, she brings up the issue of how the male line of inheritance is a source of insecurity in women's futures. Mrs. Bennet and her daughters will be turned out of their home if Mr. Bennet dies before any of the girls marries. However, Austen is content merely to bring up the issue and the worry it causes the Bennet family. The plot does not reflect the consequences that would result in the worst-case scenario, for three of the Bennet sisters are married or engaged by the conclusion of the novel.



comes in the form of witty banter. The heroine engages in a contest of wits under the guise of playfulness, and upon applying superior logic, proves not only that she can match the wits of her opponent, often a man, but actually that she surpasses his intellect. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny uses wit sometimes, but it is largely deemphasized. However, intellectual liberation is still a primary issue in the novel, as shown by Fanny's stubborn adherence to her own judgement of Mr. Crawford over filial duty regarding Sir Thomas's wishes.

The advancement of intellectual status, although not tangible, alters women's status in society. As Wollstonecraft argues in *Vindication*, if women have the capacity to learn the same things as men, they should receive the same education afforded men. Austen makes this same argument in her novels, education being an important underlying theme. Along with advancement of intellectual status will come advancement of a more material political status, so hope Wollstonecraft and Austen. For if an intellectual distinction cannot be made between the sexes, then a political distinction is no longer justified.

Austen also raises some issues of material liberation, but she does not fully pursue them. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, she brings up the issue of how the male line of inheritance is a source of insecurity in women's futures. Mrs. Bennet and her daughters will be turned out of their home if Mr. Bennet dies before any of the girls marries. However, Austen is content merely to bring up the issue and the worry it causes the Bennet family. The plot does not reflect the consequences that would result in the worst-case scenario, for three of the Bennet sisters are married or engaged by the conclusion of the novel.



*Jane Eyre* is more heavily concerned with material liberation than is *Pride and Prejudice*. Brontë makes her plot reflect the seriousness of limited means of livelihood for women. Upon fleeing Thornfield, Jane is destitute and nearly starves. By sheer luck she is able to find employment, for she is a stranger without recommendation in her new town, and therefore not trusted. Brontë also requires that Jane become financially independent before marrying Rochester, although Jane herself does not demand this. The strength of this plot development is somewhat weakened by the fact that Jane inherits a fortune by accident and not through any accomplishment of her own. However, Jane's state of financial dependence is an issue dwelt upon throughout the novel, and the plot is certainly manipulated to assure that Jane does not remain in that state of dependence by the end of the novel.

Charlotte Brontë also addresses spiritual liberation, in Christian form, in *Jane Eyre*. The primary motives for Jane's moral conduct are religious. She reins in her temper by the influence of the devout Helen Burns; she flees Thornfield despite temptation so as not to meet with God's disapproval; and she nearly submits to a loveless marriage for service to God except that she comes to the conclusion that it would be a injury against God to go through the rite of marriage without mutual spiritual investment. Spiritual liberation for Jane consists of both maintaining God's approval so that she might enter the kingdom of heaven and following her own convictions and feelings, insofar as they do not interfere with the former.

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* addresses spiritual liberation of another type. Cathy states outright, in the form of relating a dream, that heaven is not her home. Instead she is at home on the moors, which represent her own spiritual realm, secluded



from restrictive mainstream society. Likewise, instances of Catherine's defiance of stereotypical feminine behavior are acts of spiritual liberation throughout the novel. She has passionate outbursts, is rude to Edgar Linton's face, and is frank about having selfish and materialistic motives. Her self-inflicted starvation at the end of the novel is her final act of spiritual liberation from the social restraints of marriage that she cannot snap in any other way.

Kate Chopin addresses spiritual liberation in *The Awakening* in much the same manner as Emily Brontë does in *Wuthering Heights*, and Chopin even takes it a little further. Chopin's heroine Edna, like Catherine, defies society's standards of propriety for women. Edna neglects her household duties because she finds them stifling, mundane, and of little true import. She ignores her wifely duty to her husband, never following his wishes against her own. She also enters into a love affair in violation of her marriage vows, whereas Catherine remains only emotionally attached to Heathcliff. Edna, like Catherine, escapes her spiritually stifling social world through suicide, although hers is more explicitly self-willed than Catherine's.

Emily Brontë and Kate Chopin represent the radical end of the spectrum in nineteenth-century marriage-plot novels. Their novels have scandalous implications which are treated more openly than in most other feminist literature of the time. Although the landscape of both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Awakening* becomes so compounded with issues that a practical solution seems impossible, they propose a much more attainable direction of progress with regard to women's souls. Even if no material solution becomes apparent through these novels, a vision of spiritual liberation is set forth as an inspiration to all women who read them.



## Jane Austen: Finding a Middle Ground

*“Do not consider me now as an elegant female  
intending to plague you, but as a rational creature  
speaking the truth from her heart.”*

– *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 91

### USING COMMON SENSE

\* \* \* \* \*

Austen's primary focus for her heroines is intellectual liberation. She argues that men and women have equal intellectual capacity and should be treated as intellectual equals. As a moralist (Kirkham), Austen argues that intelligence is a requirement for acting morally. Her characters, male and female both, must use common sense, or in other words rational judgment, to determine on a case-by-case basis which codes of propriety to obey and which to discard. Neither male nor female characters have an inherent advantage in their ability to judge soundly. An intelligent character will understand that certain rules of propriety exist in order to avoid insulting others or to protect a young lady from being taken advantage of by a wayward man. However, an intelligent character will also understand that in some instances, rules of propriety are merely formalities and have no great function. Through employing Reason, then, the character judges when to obey the conduct books and when a better policy may exist.

On a basic level, Austen's characters use Reason to act properly. By extension, however, one must also employ Reason to act morally. For, in some instances, strict adherence to conduct books may hinder a person from accomplishing a duty that she would be able to attend to with less restraint. To take another example, an unintelligent



person may attempt to act generously and right a wrong inflicted by preexisting social standards, but if he does not understand the situation properly, then he will make an unhelpful offer, thereby thwarting his attempt to act morally. However, sometimes, Austen argues, the codes of propriety exist to preserve morality. In order to recognize the instances in which this is the case, a character must be intelligent and have sound judgment. One can neither obey conduct books all the time nor completely ignore them because each situation is unique and requires intelligent evaluation as to the most appropriate treatment. In Austen's novels, an attempt to act properly and morally without using sound judgment only results in failure, to a greater or lesser extent. Austen's implicit claim is that by sound judgment, everyone will come to the same ideas about the proper and moral course of action and that those ideas therefore belong to the domain of common sense.

### *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* particularly exemplifies Austen's standard for using rational judgement to act morally. Austen does not merely make Elizabeth of equal intelligence to men in the book; rather, she gives Elizabeth superior intelligence to every other character, man and woman both, except perhaps Mr. Darcy, who is her approximate equal. Constantly throughout the novel, Elizabeth judges the current codes of propriety to determine whether they are appropriate. She accepts nothing based on past precedent, but instead must judge for herself the merit of a particular rule of propriety.

An example occurs early in the novel in which Elizabeth finds the existing rule of propriety to be ridiculous and consequently ignores it. Her sister Jane falls ill at



Netherfield, and Elizabeth wishes to go tend to her. As it has been raining outside, Elizabeth's mother protests to her idea: "'How can you be so silly...as to think of such a thing, in all this dirt! You will not be fit to be seen when you get there'" (30). Mrs. Bennet is merely reminding Elizabeth of the status quo code of propriety that deemed it improper for women to present themselves in a dirty or unkempt state, which normally is a quite understandable expectation. However, Elizabeth responds to her mother with reason: "'I shall be very fit to see Jane—which is all I want'" (30). Elizabeth points out that the state of her appearance should not hinder her from comforting her ill sister. However, she goes beyond justifying her behavior out of necessity, for her father offers to let her have the horses, but she declines. Elizabeth knows that the carriage horses are needed on the farm and sees no reason for taking them away from their useful employment there since she would enjoy the exercise of a walk anyway. She finds her appearance of very little consequence in this situation. Thus, in this scene Austen points out through Elizabeth the ridiculousness of excessive concern with appearance. While generally maintaining a decent appearance is desirable, Elizabeth sees no reason why anyone should fuss about a little dirt.

Even though Mrs. Hurst observes that "her petticoat [was] six inches deep in mud," neither Mr. Bingley nor the stiff Mr. Darcy seem find it important. Mr. Bingley replies to Mrs. Hurst's criticisms with, "'I thought Miss Elizabeth Bennet looked remarkably well, when she came into the room this morning. Her dirty petticoat quite escaped my notice'" (33). And when Caroline teases that Elizabeth's behavior must have lessened Mr. Darcy's regard for her "'fine eyes,'" he replies, "'Not at all...; they were brightened by the exercise'" (33). Thus, Elizabeth's decision on the matter finds favor



with both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, who appear to agree that getting a little dirty is rather negligible under the circumstances.

Elizabeth also explicitly calls herself a “rational creature” at one instance in the novel (91). Since the Bennet house is entailed to Mr. Collins, he comes up with a plan to marry one of the Bennet daughters, which would remedy the situation and, in his mind, do the family a favor. The daughter he chooses is Elizabeth. Before even giving Elizabeth an opportunity to respond to his proposal, Mr. Collins continues with the assumption that she will accept: “[Y]ou may assure yourself that no ungenerous reproach shall ever pass my lips when we are married” (90). Elizabeth stops him here to tell him that she does not in fact intend to accept his offer. However, Mr. Collins cannot conceive that he would be turned down, so magnanimous a gesture he perceives himself to be making. He persuades himself instead that Elizabeth means to show modesty by refusing his initial offer, to which Elizabeth responds, “I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time” (90). Here Elizabeth exposes the ridiculousness of the notion that modesty might drive one to decline a marriage proposal when she really meant to accept it. Instead Elizabeth only finds it reasonable that a woman would accept a marriage proposal the first time rather than waiting for a second proposal, which might never be made.

Despite Elizabeth’s declaration of her sincerity, Mr. Collins persists in his line of thought. In frustration Elizabeth exclaims, “Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart” (91). Here Elizabeth directly states her preference for being a “rational creature”



over being a silly creature that society praises as “elegant,” which might be the case if she indiscriminately followed every rule of propriety, like her sister Jane. For Elizabeth, exercising intelligence is more desirable than positive reinforcement from others.

However, in some instances Elizabeth does uphold the current rules of propriety. She is constantly embarrassed by her mother. In one instance, Mrs. Bennet speaks rudely to Mr. Darcy, mistaking his impartial observation of the countryside as a “‘very confined and unvarying society’” for a criticism (38). Elizabeth tries to amend for her mother’s rudeness, saying, “‘Indeed, Mama, you are mistaken.... He only meant that there were not such a variety of people to be met with in the country as in town, which you must acknowledge to be true’” (39). In another instance, Mrs. Bennet speaks too loudly about Jane’s likelihood of marrying Bingley, which has not yet been made official, and how it will improve her daughters’ chances of marrying well also. Mrs. Bennet unabashedly discusses with Mrs. Lucas the financial advantages of the matches, none of which is yet certain. Mrs. Bennet’s loud tone opens the possibility of others overhearing her bold assumptions, which Mr. Darcy in fact does. Elizabeth attempts to stop her mother’s unchecked chatter and to save her family from embarrassment, but Mrs. Bennet replies, “‘What is Mr. Darcy to me, pray, that I should be afraid of him? I am sure we owe him no such particular civility as to be obliged to say nothing *he* should not like to hear’” (84). As Elizabeth knows that Darcy overhears this as well, she begs her mother, “‘For heaven’s sake, madam, speak lower.—What advantage can it be to you to offend Mr. Darcy?—You will never recommend yourself to his friend by so doing’” (84). Here Elizabeth discerns a very valid reason for maintaining politeness in social interaction: for, the more one offends, the more enemies she makes in society, which cannot be to her



advantage. However, Mrs. Bennet only thinks of her dislike for Mr. Darcy and cares nothing for offending him, despite Elizabeth's very perceptive suggestion that offending Mr. Darcy might also lessen Mr. Bingley's opinion of her, thus harming Jane's chances of marrying Bingley.

Another instance in which Elizabeth upholds the current rules of propriety is when Mr. Bingley jokes at Mr. Darcy's expense: "'I assure you that if Darcy were not such a great tall fellow, in comparison with myself, I should not pay him half so much deference'" (45). Elizabeth is amused by Bingley's well-intentioned jest of Darcy's imposing presence, but she perceives that he has offended Darcy, who would wish that only the way with which he conducts himself, not his physical appearance, would influence Bingley's respect of him. Although Elizabeth dislikes Darcy at this point, she stifles her laugh out of consideration for Darcy's feelings. Using the same logic she offers her mother at the ball, Elizabeth is polite to Darcy despite her personal opinion of him.

Elizabeth's role as the intellectual and moral model of the novel is clear in the Lydia-Wickham subplot. Lydia is invited to go to Brighton with friends essentially unchaperoned. Elizabeth believes their father will never let Lydia go, but not seeing cause for alarm in the situation, Mr. Bennet raises no objections to Lydia going to Brighton. When Elizabeth attempts to reason with him, he says:

'Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or other, and we can never expect her to do it with so little expense of inconvenience to her family as under the present circumstances. ... We shall have no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton. Let



her go then. Colonel Forster is a sensible man, and will keep her out of any real mischief; and she is luckily too poor to be an object of prey to any body.’ (189-190)

However, Elizabeth perceives the situation more clearly than her father. She knows that Lydia will not be well chaperoned at Brighton. Moreover, she mentions the harm Lydia’s indiscretions will bring upon the whole family: “‘Oh! my dear father, can you suppose it possible that they will not be censured and despised wherever they are known, and that their sisters will not be often involved in the disgrace?’” (190). However, Mr. Bennet disregards Elizabeth’s plea to reason and allows Lydia to go. She consequently runs off with Wickham, a danger for which Mr. Bennet believed his daughter to be too poor. Elizabeth alone foresees all this happening, but unfortunately her advice is not heeded. This as well as other the other instances mentioned show that Elizabeth alone has the greatest ability to pass judgment on existing codes of propriety and therefore is the standard for morality in the novel.

However, Elizabeth does not always judge correctly, for no one is perfect. She judges Mr. Darcy quickly based on his insult of refusing to dance with her at the first ball. She immediately forms a great dislike for Mr. Darcy, which colors all her subsequent perceptions of him. Although Darcy gradually reveals himself to be a fair and morally fastidious person, Elizabeth remains blind to this for more than half of the novel. Moreover, Elizabeth’s dislike for Darcy allows her to be deceived by Wickham’s untruthful account of how Darcy has abused him. Ordinarily, Elizabeth would most likely be skeptical of the exaggerated account Wickham presents, but because she already thinks poorly of Mr. Darcy, she believes that what Wickham says is possible. Through



Elizabeth's errors in judgment, Austen cautions against gaining excessive confidence in one's ability to judge, for one can always be deceived. Elizabeth learns through her experience with Darcy and Wickham that her powers of judgment are indeed fallible and that she should reserve her judgment until having gathered sufficient information.

The model for sound rational judgement in Elizabeth is reinforced by the deficiencies found in other characters in the novel. Lydia is one of the most morally deficient characters in the novel. She disregards rules of propriety to indulge her current interest. Sometimes Lydia's transgressions are minor, such as interrupting Mr. Collins when he is reading Fordyce's *Sermons*, a popular conduct book. However, her running off with Mr. Wickham without being married to him shows that she is capable of more serious transgressions. All Lydia's actions show that she is not intelligent enough to judge soundly. While she realizes that the conduct Dr. Fordyce recommends is unnecessarily strict, she does not see, as Elizabeth does, that some rules of propriety are beneficial. For example, even though Darcy had to pay Wickham to agree to marry Lydia, she never realizes how close she came to social damnation by running off with him. She believes that she alone is responsible for the marriage, and she congratulates herself that she, the youngest of her sisters, is the first to marry. Lydia simply is not intelligent enough to understand how society functions and therefore is unable to act morally. Both her more minor offenses and her escapade with Wickham show that she does not understand the larger social function for rules of propriety, and if she does not understand them, then she has no impulse to obey them.

Jane has the opposite problem from Lydia. Jane obeys every rule of propriety perfectly; she never criticizes the status quo expectations of women. Jane's unilateral



obedience to the rules of propriety prevents her from being immoral to others, but because she cannot discern which rules are worth obeying and which are ridiculous, Jane makes herself vulnerable to being taken advantage of. For example, Caroline Bingley pretends to be Jane's friend, but, despising Jane's inferior social position, Caroline sabotages the budding romance between her brother Mr. Bingley and Jane. She helps to persuade her brother to spend the winter in London and when Jane visits London as well, Caroline conceals the information from her brother. Both Caroline and Darcy attempt to persuade Bingley that Jane does not care for him, although Darcy's intent is not malicious. Darcy notices that Bingley highly regards Jane, but since Jane keeps her affections so concealed, the way a proper lady was supposed to before the man's intentions were explicitly known, Darcy believes she only regards Bingley as a friend and aims to save his friend the disappointment of a rejection or a lukewarm marriage, which Darcy probably feels Jane may very well accept simply for the social and financial benefits. Jane's exaggerated goodness causes her trouble in two ways, then. First, it makes her naïve, so that malicious people such as Caroline Bingley may easily hurt her while still maintaining a façade of friendship. Secondly, it conceals her true feelings so that a mutually desired match may not come to pass.

Jane's excessive propriety comes from a lack of discernment. Her sister Elizabeth criticizes her for this at one point: "'Oh! you are a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general! You never see a fault in any body. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in all my life'" (15). While finding the best in people may be an attractive quality in a person, Elizabeth is in fact nicely pointing out Jane's lack in intelligence. Elizabeth benefits from judging



others accurately rather than viewing them all as agreeable. This enables her to see Caroline's maliciousness from the start, while Jane persists in thinking the best of her friend.

The male characters, excepting Darcy, are deficient when compared to Elizabeth as well. Mr. Collins is a parody of status quo propriety in a different respect than Jane. He quotes and reads from conduct books, hoping others will benefit from the advice but succeeding only in offending. He also annoys everyone with his excessive praise of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, herself included. Perhaps most amusing, Mr. Collins believes himself to be doing Elizabeth a great favor by offering her a proposal of marriage when in fact he is the last man she would desire for a husband. Mr. Collins recognizes the injustice of the Bennets' house being entailed to him, and he wishes to act with perfect moral soundness to remedy that injustice, but he cannot put himself in the Bennets' consciousness, and therefore he is prevented from accomplishing his moral aim. His lack of intelligence prevents him from conceiving a truly magnanimous plan to remedy the situation. He instead comes up with a plan that does not find favor with Elizabeth and therefore accomplishes no generous or moral purpose. To conceive a legitimate solution to the entail on the Bennets' estate, Mr. Collins would have to possess much greater powers of reason. He tries to act morally, at least superficially, but lacks the mental capacity to conceive a true solution.

Each of these characters represents how intelligence is necessary for proper and moral action. Lydia does not act morally because she does not understand the reasons why she ought. Jane restricts herself too severely to proper behavior and consequently enables others to take advantage of her. Mr. Collins is a ridiculous character who tries to



act properly but is so far from it that the attempt is laughable. He is an exaggerated illustration of how one cannot even recognize how to act properly without a basic intelligence. Elizabeth and Darcy are the only two competent moral agents in the novel. Since the novel focuses on Elizabeth's moral deliberations rather than Darcy's, she serves as the novel's model for rational judgment of the rules of propriety. She accepts nothing in the status quo without judging its validity. Occasionally both Elizabeth and Darcy judge incorrectly, but they are still the intellectual and moral superiors of every other character in the novel. Austen makes clear in this novel that appropriate rules of propriety can never be written down for every unique situation. One must use rational judgment to discern what is proper in a given situation, even though judgment is fallible.

### *Fanny*

Fanny in *Mansfield Park* is much different than Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. She is much more submissive and willing to obey authority even when she might not agree with what the authority figure commands. Fanny also questions the soundness of her judgement much more than Elizabeth does, and she has a much lower opinion of herself. However, Fanny still adheres steadfastly to her own judgement when she is convinced that she is right.

The most prominent example of Fanny adhering to her own judgement contrary to what social wisdom prescribes is when she refuses to accept Henry Crawford's proposal of marriage. Fanny comes from a lower social class, and her family does not have much money. Henry Crawford is a wealthy man, and marrying him would guarantee financial security for Fanny's future, in addition to helping her family in the present. Most women



would quickly accept such a marriage proposal, so long as they found the man agreeable, which Fanny does. However, Fanny's judgement serves a higher call of morality. She distrusts Crawford's character, in which she is proven justified when he and Mrs. Rushworth, Fanny's cousin, run off together and fall into ignominy due to their adulterous behavior.

Sir Thomas, Fanny's uncle, believes Fanny would be irresponsible and ungrateful not to accept Crawford's proposal and strongly encourages her to change her mind – this, of course, being before Crawford disgraces himself:

You have shewn yourself very, very different from any thing that I had imagined. The advantage or disadvantage of your family—of your parents—your brothers and sisters—never seems to have had a moment's share in your thoughts on this occasion. ... You think only of yourself; and because you do not feel for Mr. Crawford exactly what a young, heated fancy imagines to be necessary for happiness, you ... are in a wild fit of folly, throwing away from you such an opportunity of being settled in life, eligibly, honourably, nobly settled, as will, probably, never occur to you again.

However, not even filial duty can encourage Fanny to act contrary to her judgement. Sir Thomas's points all are valid, but Fanny has seen indications that Sir Thomas has not that Henry Crawford's character is flawed, and she knows that marriage is an irrevocable contract. Although marrying Crawford may bring her more wealth and social importance in the present, should he commit a moral transgression in the future, she too will be disgraced. Through Fanny, Austen promotes a woman's right to choose either



acceptance or rejection of a marriage proposal, regardless of the material advantages that may be gained. A rational woman will have valid reasons for decision, even if someone older and more experienced in life, such as Sir Thomas, believes it to be a poor decision. Only the woman in question has the right to decide whether an offer of marriage is worth accepting, Austen implicitly argues. Material and social consequences should not factor in to the decision, even when benefits may extend to relatives. In Sir Thomas's speech and Fanny's reaction, Austen critiques the material concerns connected with marriage that consumed so many people's thoughts in her time.

### THE GAME OF WIT

\* \* \* \* \*

Wit is another important aspect of Austen's social criticism. Interestingly, wit is largely absent in Fanny's character, though certainly present in the Crawfords. Nonetheless, wit appears in some form in all of Austen's novels, and several of her heroines are very witty. Austen uses witty banter as a vehicle for women to assert their power against other women and especially against men. Wit is a game governed by the rules of Reason. Whoever makes the better argument wins. When men invite women into the game of wit in Austen's novels, they temporarily grant them status as an equal rational being, and if a woman wins a particular game of wit, she may delight in not an equal but a superior faculty of reason to the man's. Rational thought was the key to intellectual, if not social, power during Austen's time. By granting women access to rational thought, Austen's male characters invite them to contend for that intellectual power.



Austen's emphasis on wit in her novels shows an advancement over a previous novelist, Fanny Burney. *Evelina*, Burney's first novel, stars a lively and witty heroine. However, Deborah Ross comments in *The Excellence of Falsehood: Romance, Realism, and Women's Contribution to the Novel* that "Burney's novels show a growing disapproval of female wits" (121). In *Camilla*, Burney's third novel, "the moral danger of wit is a major theme" (125). Ross conjectures that this transition may have something to do with Burney's encounters with Mrs. Thrale and Madame Staël, neither of whom, Burney writes in her diary, "'could ever withstand the pleasure of uttering a repartee, let it wound whom it might'" (Ross 121). Burney comes to view wit as self-aggrandizing and, therefore, in conflict with the "'feminine delicacy'" she promotes (117).

Burney's view of wit comes close to the "angel in the house," ideology popularized in the nineteenth century. "Angels," too, are defined by a "feminine delicacy" (Ross 117). Asserting power through the game of wit directly conflicts with that feminine delicacy. An "angel's" duty was to relieve her husband's stress after a hard day of work, not aggravate it through witty banter. Like Burney, the "angel in the house" ideology would view wit as self-aggrandizing, since it makes a woman's position important and visible, rather than self-effacing.

Burney's mistrust of wit testifies to the potential it holds for women to assert their power. Most Austen heroines use wit, and, despite Burney's view, none of the heroines is self-aggrandizing. Austen, unlike Burney, views wit as a game of Reason that women have as much right to play as men. To win the game of wit is merely to establish the credibility of one's powers of Reason. Austen's heroines never gloat in their victories of witty banter, nor do they typically use wit to wound, as Burney criticized of Mrs. Thrale



and Madame de Staël. Rather, the heroines' wit is purely a sign of their intelligence, and, as discussed in the previous section, intelligence leads to moral action.

### *Elizabeth*

Several instances of witty banter occur in *Pride and Prejudice*, typically involving Elizabeth. She banters with several characters, including Jane, Charlotte, Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Bennet, Mr. Collins, and especially Mr. Darcy. The banter is always a power struggle, though not greedy or angry. The contenders solely seek to claim that their reasoning is superior.

Elizabeth's banter with Darcy, besides a power struggle, is also an act of courtship. By demonstrating her intelligence to Darcy, she displays her desirability in a subtle and socially acceptable way. She also encourages a response from Darcy, forcing him to take interest in her. Of course, Elizabeth herself is not conscious that she is seeking Darcy's approval. She believes herself to dislike him, yet cannot help to prove to him her sound ability to reason.

Maaja Stewart notes a sexual aspect to wit in Austen's novels:

Wit in women curiously implies the same kind of sexuality as did the old libertinism, since both wit and libertinism suggest that power and aggression constitute the central aspect of sexuality. Wit in women, like sexual aggression, threatens the cultural order of domination: witty women control courtship by explicitly mocking and questioning their lovers' language of love. (70-71)



Elizabeth's behavior toward Darcy supports Stewart's argument regarding wit. By critiquing his logic and forcing him to take notice of her intellectual powers, power and aggression certainly do form an important part of her sexuality. However, witty banter serves as a stable and socially acceptable form of outlet for this aggressive sexuality. In this way, Austen's heroines avoid the heightened repression that is representative of heroines in Victorian fiction.

A representative example of banter between Darcy and Elizabeth occurs when she is staying at Netherfield to tend to Jane. Bingley remarks how so many women are accomplished, to which Darcy replies, "'The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it no otherwise than by netting a purse, or covering a screen. ... I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished'" (35). At this point, Elizabeth jumps in to test Darcy's definition of an accomplished woman. "'[Y]ou must comprehend,'" she says, "'a great deal in your idea of an accomplished woman'" (35). Caroline, wishing to assert her rational ability, begins to define requirements in "'music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages,'" and Darcy continues, "'All this she must possess, ... and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading'" (35). Elizabeth, to claim the absurdity of these requirements, responds, "'I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*'" (36). With this statement, Elizabeth makes Darcy's and Caroline's statements meaningless. She reveals that their expectations of an accomplished woman are so high as to be ridiculous. Thus, Elizabeth asserts her rational authority, as well as reclaiming the right to the possible title of an accomplished woman.



In this example, as in many others, Elizabeth asserts her rational ability, making the others' arguments worthless. This is also an example of Elizabeth participating in courtship with Darcy. Besides displaying her intelligence, Elizabeth makes an implicit claim to being an accomplished woman. She is presenting herself as a desirable romantic candidate for Darcy's consideration.

All the witty banter in the novel involving Elizabeth presents her with opportunities to assert her intelligence and, therefore, her equal intellectual agency. She jumps into others' conversations, as in the prior example, to challenge any misconceptions she perceives. In this way, Elizabeth displays herself to others as an intelligent, competent, rational being, asserting her power and desirability, all in a socially acceptable form. Even though aggressive and sexual aspects underlie witty banter, society perceives it as jest, so it allows women an outlet for those emotions that would otherwise be perceived as unfeminine and socially unacceptable.

### THE IDEAL PATRIARCH

\* \* \* \* \*

Although Austen criticizes certain male behavior in her novels, she does not critique the institution of patriarchy as a whole. Instead, Austen promotes the concept of an ideal patriarch, one who uses his power in a benevolent, moral manner. When she criticizes male characters, it is because they are not fulfilling the duties required by their position of authority. As much as Austen promotes the intellectual equality of men and women, she views the social hierarchy as acceptable and important to social order.

Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the few examples of an ideal patriarch in Austen's novels. Darcy is in a role of authority not only because he is male but also



because he is a member of the aristocracy. He takes his duties very seriously, to the point where he seems ridiculously serious to his friends. Darcy himself claims, “[I]t has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule” (50). He has dedicated his whole life to eradicating weaknesses of character, and he does not wish to dwell on any he might still have even as the butt of an innocent joke. The severity of Darcy’s character becomes further evident as he continues, “I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offenses against myself. My feelings are not puffed about with every attempt to move them. My temper would perhaps be called resentful.—My good opinion once lost is lost for ever” (51). Certainly Darcy’s severity goes a little too far here. He does have faults, but his strength is in being able to recognize them. Darcy has a very sound reasoning faculty and has devoted considerable time to both improving his character and to identifying what faults still remain. As such, he is in a position in which he is least likely to abuse the power he is granted as a patriarch.

Mr. Bennet, on the other hand, is an example of a patriarch who falls short of his duties. Having married his wife for her beauty, Mr. Bennet soon realized she was entirely without sense and proceeded to lose all interest in her except to make fun of her. Mr. Bennet’s own amusement takes a higher priority than his duties as a husband and a father:

Elizabeth ... had never been blind to the impropriety of her father’s behavior as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her



thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum, which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. (194)

Mr. Bennet does not fulfill his duties as a patriarch because he does not work to establish a functional and respectful family dynamic. He does nothing to check his wife's silliness, and consequently his daughters have no respect for her and neither does he. Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, is highly regarded by both his family and his servants at Pemberly as a kind and judicious head of the household.

Mr. Bennet's irresponsibility becomes most apparent in his decision to allow Lydia to go to Brighton with unreliable chaperones. He uses the following logic in making his decision:

'Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or other, and we can never expect her to do it with so little expense of inconvenience to her family as under the present circumstances. ... We shall have no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton. Let her go then. Colonel Forster is a sensible man, and will keep her out of any real mischief; and she is luckily too poor to be an object of prey to any body.' (189-190)

Mr. Bennet is not intentionally irresponsible in allowing Lydia to go; he does not believe she will attract enough notice to get into any trouble. However, if he took his obligations as a parent more seriously, Mr. Bennet would be more cautious in making this decision. He would not let his wish for peace and quiet at home to influence whether his daughter should go on a trip where she could potentially get into trouble.



Lydia does in fact get herself into trouble because she is so flirtatious. Mr.

Bennet was likely correct that no man would court Lydia because she is too poor to be an advantageous match for any of the soldiers. However, Lydia's flirtatiousness expose her to being taken advantage of sexually outside of marriage, which is something Mr. Bennet does not take into consideration. At only 15 years old, Lydia does not have the wisdom to know that if she runs off with a man without being married to him, he probably does not intend ever to marry her, regardless of what promises he may make. In allowing Lydia to go on a trip with irresponsible chaperones at such a young age, Mr. Bennet is shirking his responsibilities as a father and opening the door for an event like what comes to pass between Lydia and Wickham.

In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas is not an ideal patriarch either. He is well intentioned, and everyone at Mansfield Park looks up to him and respects his authority, but his fault is that he is too severe. When he decides to take in his niece Fanny, "... Sir Thomas was fully resolved to be the real and consistent patron of the selected child" (6). He considers the decision of whether to take in Fanny very carefully and agrees to it with the intent of making the experience as beneficial to Fanny as possible. However, Fanny cannot appreciate Sir Thomas's good intentions as a child because he rarely shows any affection, and this makes her afraid of him. Sir Thomas's stunted affections negatively influence his family as well: "[T]hough a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their [his children's] spirits before him" (16). Sir Thomas does not let his children become close to him, and so while he believes that his daughters are being raised with strong, moral characters, he does not see that they are actually spoiled, weak, and not much concerned with morals at



all. This becomes evident when Maria leaves her husband's house and runs away with Henry Crawford. Sir Thomas never would suppose that his daughter would do such a thing, but he never knew her well enough to judge properly. So, while Sir Thomas is not abusing his role as patriarch, he certainly has room for improvement.

Austen holds her patriarchs to high expectations, given that they occupy such an important position in society, and her critique of patriarchy is that most men fall short of those expectations. Fundamentally, however, Austen holds that patriarchy in its ideal form is the proper ordering of society. An ideal patriarch will use his power for the collective good of all those in his family, not for selfish aims. Austen views patriarchy primarily in terms of responsibility rather than power; she more or less accepts the status quo arrangement of power. However, the authors I will proceed to discuss find patriarchy inherently flawed. They would view Austen's expectations as too idealistic, for unchecked power will most often lead to corruption.

### IS FANNY AN ANGEL IN THE HOUSE?

\* \* \* \* \*

While patriarchy is upheld in both *Pride and Prejudice* and in *Mansfield Park*, the heroine of each novel responds to it differently. Elizabeth challenges patriarchs, including Darcy and even her father; she is bold, confident, witty, and lively. Fanny, on the other hand, feels humble toward patriarchs; she feels guilty if she challenges them and does not believe herself to be their equal; she is timid and self-deprecating, lacks confidence, and second-guesses her judgement. Whereas Elizabeth does not at all resemble an angel in the house, Fanny definitely exhibits certain angel traits: she is submissive, self-effacing, modest, and generally obedient. Could Fanny then be said to



represent an angel in the house? Did Austen's later work incorporate angel ideology in ways that *Pride and Prejudice* does not?

*Mansfield Park* was written from 1811 to 1813 (Kingsley xix); *Pride and Prejudice*, on the other hand, was begun as *First Impressions* before 1797 (Kirkham 53). With the advance of approximately 15 years, angel ideology likely was beginning to have more influence. However, despite Fanny's submissiveness and timidity, she does have a stubborn streak that surfaces when she believes that she is in the right, as with Henry Crawford. Even though Fanny feels tremendous guilt for disappointing Sir Thomas so much and continually guesses whether her judgement of Crawford is sound, she never sways to the great pressure put on her to marry Crawford.

One also must question whether Fanny's timidity and self-deprecation is too extreme to believe. Her timidity stands out all the more since none of the other characters in the novel resemble her in the least. Fanny is the only character with a tremendous inferiority complex. This is understandable, however, since she is uprooted from her home as a child and sent to live with people wealthier, more educated, and higher in social station than she, and who constantly remind her that she is not their equal. Mrs. Norris in particular reinforces Fanny's inferiority complex. Fanny's brothers and sisters do not have her inferiority complex either, so it seems likely that it stems almost entirely from the circumstances in which she lives at Mansfield Park.

Since Fanny is the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, the question remains as to whether Austen advocates her as a model for feminine behavior. However, given the reasonable conclusion that Fanny's behavior is a product of her environment, what would that mean Austen was advocating? Do we suppose that Austen finds it healthy for women to live



among their social superiors so as to develop an inferiority complex that will help them to be properly modest and self-deprecating? This seems a silly conclusion indeed.

However, note that none of the other characters in landscape of the novel exhibits anything resembling angel behavior. The Bertram sisters are selfish and morally wayward; Mary Crawford is domineering and manipulative; Mrs. Norris finds pleasure in insulting others; Lady Bertram is selfish and silly; and Fanny's mother and sisters are loud, impatient, and crude. Given this landscape, Fanny is more likely an ironic portrait than a model for feminine behavior. Her modesty is so extreme that it is silly, especially given the selfishness of most of the other female characters. The same writer who penned the lively and convincing Elizabeth Bennet could not possibly have seriously advocated the ridiculous modesty and self-deprecation seen in the heroine of *Mansfield Park*. Fanny may be more nearly a parody of the angel in the house than a promotion of this stereotype.

### LIMITATIONS IN AUSTEN'S SOCIAL CRITIQUE

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite Austen's assertions of men's and women's equal intellectual capacity, her novels still had some limitations that later novelists were able to overcome. For example, Austen characters must find solutions within the current social structure. They are not permitted to recede from society and create a separate marginal society. Within the mainstream social structure, then, marriage is the only option for Austen's heroines. Austen encourages marrying for love, but she does not do much to address complications that arise when marriage is mandatory. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen brings up a problem of five daughters who need to marry well before their father dies or else they are



reduced to comparative poverty. If they do not find a man they love before they are turned out of a home, they must either marry for convenience or accept poverty, which will destroy the last of their hopes of marrying well. Also, most of Austen's novels are set in the countryside, containing only so many options for matchmaking between men and women. If a woman does not find love in her limited social interaction, she must either settle for a marriage without love or remain in spinsterhood. However, spinsterhood is not an acceptable option for Austen characters either. Their financial security depends on their marrying well. In the ideal world of Austen's novels, everything works out fairly. All the women who should get good husbands do. Thus, she is avoiding the reality of the complications that arise when marriage is the only option.

Secondly, despite advocating marriage for love, Austen also promotes making a socially advantageous match. Elizabeth, the most morally upstanding character in *Pride and Prejudice*, marries the best financially, and Jane, the other meritorious character, also marries very well. *Mansfield Park* carries more of a critique of marrying for materialistic motives, but Fanny does not end up marrying a pauper. The general message is that good girls catch good husbands. And despite Elizabeth's ideas about marrying for love, she is not unaffected by the advantages she would enjoy as mistress of Pemberly and the honor of receiving a proposal from such an important man.

Lastly, as members of the landed gentry, Austen's characters never even think about pursuing a career, inside or outside of marriage. While their social position prevents them from having to work as a governess and frees them from the angel in the house stereotype, it also means they have virtually no careers available to them if they



want to stay in the same social class. All the careers lay in the middle class, so Austen heroines don't even dream of financial independence, a concern that becomes of primary importance in subsequent novels.

## Charlotte Brontë: Two Warring Selves

*"I had rather be a thing than an angel."*

– Jane Eyre, p. 294

### **PASSION, REPRESSION, AND THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE**

\* \* \* \* \*

With the rise of the capitalist marketplace came a shift in the intellectual and religious climate of England. The "angel in the house" ideology, reflected somewhat in Austen's work, ascended to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century. Therefore, whereas Elizabeth Bennet's sparkling wit may avoid great censure in *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonist in *Jane Eyre* must exhibit more "angelic" attributes in order to earn social approval.

Jane Eyre is less outspoken than Elizabeth. She has only a few outbursts in the course of the novel where she cannot help saying what she really thinks. The rest of the time, she usually waits to be prompted by Rochester before speaking. Elizabeth, on the other hand, jumps into conversations whenever she can to display her wit and reasoning



abilities. Jane is also more deferential than Elizabeth, always calling Rochester “sir” and “master” despite their intimate relationship. Even though Jane exhibits these “angelic” attributes, she received more public censure than did Elizabeth Bennet. In a contemporary review of *Jane Eyre*, Miss Rigby writes:

‘Jane Eyre is proud, and therefore she is ungrateful, too. It pleased God to make her an orphan, friendless, and penniless—yet she thanks nobody, least of all Him, for the food and raiment, the friends, companions, and instructors of her helpless youth.... On the contrary, she looks upon all that has been done for her not only as her undoubted right, but as falling far short of it.’ (Gilbert and Gubar 338)

To the twenty-first-century reader, Jane most likely does not seem proud or un-Christian. She refers to God and Christian duty several times throughout the novel, especially when leaving Thornfield, and she counts herself unworthy of fine presents from Rochester. Elizabeth, by contrast, is quite prideful, and her pride in her ability to judge well is her central flaw in the novel. However, *Pride and Prejudice* enjoyed a much better public reception than *Jane Eyre*. A different set of standards was in place during Jane Austen’s time than those during Charlotte Brontë’s time. Jane Eyre was expected to be more self-effacing and more overtly religious than was Elizabeth Bennet.

Jane certainly does not fit the angel in the house stereotype perfectly. Indeed, at one point she proclaims to Rochester, “‘I had rather be a *thing* than an angel,’” (294). But although Jane nominally rejects angel ideology, it still heavily influences her in the form of Christian virtue. Since she is an orphan, Jane’s training in angel ideology comes not from her mother but from a childhood friend, Helen Burns.



Before meeting Helen, Jane is a passionate and unrestrained child. She yells vulgarly at both her aunt and her cousin John, and she strikes back when John hits her: “I don’t know very well what I did with my hands, but he called me ‘Rat! rat!’ and bellowed out aloud” (17). When she meets Helen and observes her silent submission to unfairness and abuse, Jane articulates the philosophy she has held thus far in her young life:

‘If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should – so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again.’ (68)

Jane’s view is understandable, since she spent her early childhood having to defend herself from unfair attacks. However, it is only excusable to the conservative Victorian audience because Jane is still young and may learn from Helen the proper way to behave. “‘Heathens and savage tribes hold that doctrine,’” Helen says; “‘but Christians and civilized nations disown it’” (68). Brontë’s evangelical Christian upbringing manifests itself here in Helen’s voice. The “angel in the house” ideology appears in the form of Christian forbearance, which also includes self-censoring. “‘It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences extend to all connected with you...’” Helen says (66). Her words, modeled after the teachings of the New Testament, extend also to the patient wife who is supposed to endure her husband’s short temper without voicing any complaint herself.



Jane grows up to partially accept Helen's worldview, but not entirely. Helen dies when the girls are still children, preventing her from continuing to influence Jane as an adult. Mr. Brocklehurst's neglect of Lowood results in the semi-starvation of the pupils and illness spreading throughout the school without being treated. As a result, Helen becomes fatally ill. Yet on her death bed, she does not express anger toward Mr. Brocklehurst. Instead, she says, "By dying young I shall escape great sufferings. I had not qualities or talents to make my way very well in the world: I should have been continually at fault" (94-95). Because Helen has completely accepted the angel in the house ideology that is impossible to live up to, she can see nothing but her faults, and life is nothing but suffering for her. Her very name, Helen Burns, suggests the "all-consuming (and consumptive)" nature of her extreme repression (Gilbert and Gubar 346). Jane learns to repress herself somewhat, but not to the consumptive degree that Helen does.

### *The Masochistic Angel*

The repression that Jane learns to practice gives her masochistic tendencies. Michelle Massé writes, "[T]he Gothic novel is indeed 'about' masochism" (2). By this Massé means that Gothic heroines believe that dominance is a natural part of love and that "punishment is 'for your own good'" (198). Masochism is directly related to the angel in the house ideology and represented fully in the character of Helen Burns. Helen translates all her punishment as positive and beneficial. When Miss Scatcherd flogs Helen for petty, contrived reasons that are not her fault, Jane expresses her pity for the teacher being so cruel. To this Helen replies: "Cruel? Not at all! She is severe: she



dislikes my faults'" (66). Helen has internalized the ideas that her subordinate place in life is natural and proper and that any punishment given by her superiors is merited. By completely abandoning her own judgement in favor of her superiors, Helen fulfills the angel in the house stereotype.

Massé describes gothic heroines as "[g]irls who, seeking recognition and love, learn to forget or deny that they also wanted independence and agency" (3). However, independence is one of Jane's greatest desires. Massé in fact does not consider Jane masochistic because "the early absence of love enables a clear separation between the affection she desires and authoritarianism" (192). Unlike Helen, Jane does not believe that her punishment is always deserved. Massé cites the red-room incident in Jane's childhood as "the culmination of a long process that makes Jane radically suspicious of any claim that punishment is 'for your own good'" (198). However, the red room incident occurs before Jane meets Helen, and thus before Jane's training in angel ideology and consequent masochism.

Jane's masochistic tendencies surface when she practices Christian forbearance. After Helen influences her, several examples appear in which Jane derives satisfaction from servile or emotionally painful circumstances. One instance is when Jane begins to grow restless as a teacher at Lowood:

... I tired of the routine of eight years in one afternoon. I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space; 'Then,' I cried, half desperate, 'grant me at least a new



servitude!’ ... ‘There is something in that.... I know there is, because it does not sound too sweet...’ (99-100).

Here Jane does deny that she wants independence. She feels unjustified in wanting liberty, so she adjusts her wish so that it comes in the form of servitude. She exchanges her true wish for something she feels will meet with God’s approval.

Another instance of Jane’s masochistic tendencies occurs when she decides to flee Thornfield. Jane knows that it is the only acceptable option within social and Christian rules, but her personal desire is to remain with the man she loves: “[T]hat I must leave him decidedly, instantly, entirely, is intolerable. I cannot do it” (335). Yet even though it is emotionally painful for her, Jane decides that she must flee Thornfield:

But, then, a voice within me averred that I could do it; and foretold that I should do it. I wrestled with my own resolution: I wanted to be weak that I might avoid the awful passage of further suffering I saw laid out for me; and conscience, turned tyrant, held passion by the throat, told her tauntingly, she had yet but dipped her dainty foot in the slough, and swore that with that arm of iron, he would thrust her down to unsounded depths of agony. (335)

The shockingly violent language of this passage is what Jane chooses to describe how her conscience operates. She willingly chooses the path of suffering in order to maintain God’s approval. In the sense of Christian forbearance, then, Jane does meet Massé’s description of the masochistic Gothic heroine. And since Christian forbearance is the channel through which Jane imitates the angel in the house stereotype, she is masochistic insofar as she exhibits angel behavior.



*The Cycle of Repression and Passion*

Jane does not completely match the angel stereotype, of course. She goes through cycles of repression and passionate expression, the latter erupting when the former fails. John Kucich argues, “In Jane’s case, surrender to her passion is directly linked to her vulnerability to others, when Brocklehurst and Mrs. Reed willfully misinterpret her exposed feelings, and use them to humiliate her publicly” (49). Kucich reads Jane’s passionate outbursts negatively, as moments when her self-control fails. In addition, considering Brontë’s novels in general, he interprets repression itself as sexual gratification:

In both the juvenilia and the later novels, desire is formulated as an idiosyncratic organization of expression and repression that makes these two gestures parallel, sometimes interchangeable means of intensifying emotional experience. If the novels are rebellious, the rebellion is to be found not only in latent rage and subversive sexuality but also in a particular Brontëan formulation of desire that is articulated partly through repression itself. (38)

Kucich’s argument acknowledges the masochistic tendencies in *Jane Eyre*, as well as in Brontë’s other heroines. However, viewing her passionate outbursts as a “surrender” assumes that Jane unambiguously wishes to maintain her repressed, socially acceptable demeanor. Rather than being moments of weakness, Jane’s passionate outbursts are moments in which she asserts power. They occur at moments of vulnerability only in the sense that the façade Jane maintains for social approval is vulnerable to being superseded



by her true passionate self. Jane's passionate outbursts, verbal expressions of her sexuality, are at war with her wish to remain socially respectable throughout the novel. The outbursts are better seen as part of an irresolvable conflict than as moments of weakness.

Jane's most memorable outburst of passion occurs right before Rochester's initial marriage proposal:

'Do you think I am an automaton? – a machine without feelings? ... Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless? – You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you, – and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal – as we are!'" (284)

This speech is both an expression of Jane's sexuality and an assertion of power. While angels were supposed to be essentially asexual, Jane declares that she does indeed have "feelings," "as much soul," "and full as much heart." In other words, Jane is declaring that she does indeed have sexual feelings, and she has a right to have them. Moreover, she denies that Rochester has superior status over her. Her brief attempt to excuse her conduct – "'I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh'" – is subverted by her final assertion: "'as if



... we stood at God's feet, equal – as we are!’” She is not asserting power over Rochester in this passage, but rather insisting that he has no claim to power over her.

Jane's conduct during this speech, however, is rare. When she does display her passion, she often excuses it by saying or implying that she was simply overcome and could not help herself. Here Brontë refers to the Romantic notion of a person's Nature that she cannot help expressing. For Brontë, that Nature is a passionate one. However, the repressive, angelic qualities that Jane's passion is at war with more often exhibit themselves in her interactions with Rochester. Her manner toward Rochester is usually subservient. This is most obvious in her obsessively addressing him as “master,” more so than decorum requires. She exhibits subservience even in her first encounter with Rochester, during the incident in which he falls off his horse: “I should have been afraid to touch a horse when alone, but when told to do it, I was disposed to obey” (131). Rather than taking offense to being issued orders, Jane is predisposed to obey Rochester's command. Her submissiveness is evidence of the angel ideology that she has internalized, for as a child she certainly was not “disposed to obey.”

Jane's most prominent passionate outburst as a child is when she berates Mrs. Reed for speaking untruthfully of her to Mr. Brocklehurst, and it is much more severe and critical than her speech to Rochester:

‘I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.’ (45)



When Jane has finished castigating Mrs. Reed, she observes, "... Mrs. Reed looked frightened; her work had slipped from her knee; she was lifting up her hands, rocking herself to and fro, and even twisting her face as if she would cry" (46). This is evidence enough that her speech has given her power over Mrs. Reed. Moreover, Jane does not feel remorse over expressing herself this way; quite the opposite: "Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt" (46). Before Helen influences Jane toward angelic behavior, she expresses her passion more overtly and with less remorse. As an adult, however, Jane constantly battles between her repressive, submissive angelic tendencies and her desire to express her passion openly. Brontë wants her heroine to gain society's approval, but at the same time she wants Jane to be free to express her passion, a quality almost entirely absent in Austen's novels. Brontë tries to find a compromise between Jane's two tendencies, but she cannot find a happy medium. Passion is the diametrical opposite to the angel in the house, and thus the two cannot coexist in a settled state. As a result, Jane walks precariously between the two impulses, some moments being swayed toward her angelic tendencies, and other times being roused to a passionate outburst.

### *Passion and Insanity*

As an expression of sexuality, passion was dangerous to the Victorians, and they consequently linked it very closely with insanity. Jane's most heightened moment of passion occurs when she is locked in the red-room as a child. Brontë links passion with insanity even at this early point in the novel, as Jane's confinement in the red-room is constantly reminiscent of an insane asylum. Jane's wild flailing requires Miss Abbot to



restrain her, as though with a straightjacket: ““Hold her arms, Miss Abbot; she’s like a mad cat”” (19). This first explicit reference to madness is followed shortly after by a second: “[Bessie] and Miss Abbot stood with folded arms, looking darkly and doubtfully on my face, as incredulous of my sanity” (19-20). Bessie also links passion itself with madness in her advice to Jane: “[Y]ou should try to be useful and pleasant, then, perhaps you would have a home here; but if you become *passionate* and rude, Missis will send you away, I am sure [my emphasis]” (20). Bessie’s language works equally well on a general level: so long as women are “useful and pleasant,” they will not be sent to an asylum, but *passion* will surely cause them to be sent away. When Bessie and Miss Abbot finally leave Jane by herself, she gets the urge to escape her imprisonment: “... Resolve ... instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression – as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die” (22). Jane’s whim to starve herself is reminiscent of some so-called madwomen’s method of escape from their unjust imprisonment. It also anticipates Catherine Linton’s self-inflicted starvation in *Wuthering Heights* as a means of escaping her social imprisonment.

When Jane frightens herself with thoughts of Mr. Reed’s ghost, the red-room being where he died, she “uttered a wild, involuntary cry,” foreshadowing Bertha’s maniacal laughter (14). Bessie and Miss Abbot rush to see what is the matter, but Mrs. Reed demands that Jane remain locked in the red-room: “[Y]ou will now stay here an hour longer, and it is only on condition of perfect obedience that I shall liberate you then” (25). Mrs. Reed’s words imply a connection to an insane asylum as well. Women who were not perfectly submissive and content in their domestic roles were labeled



insane; thus the sign of their recovery was “perfect submission” to their prescribed role. Mrs. Reed will liberate Jane only when she submits to her proscribed role of a dependant and inferior in the Reed house. Left alone again with her unrestrained imagination, Jane faints in the red-room. Interestingly, her fainting is both a submission and a defiance. She becomes perfectly calm, as Mrs. Reed required, since she is unconscious, but she does it through an excess of passion rather than through curbing her passion.

As an adult, Jane cannot directly assert the same degree of passion that she exhibits in the red-room scene because it would not be socially acceptable. In order to maintain Jane’s respectability without entirely sacrificing her passion, Brontë creates the character of Bertha, Rochester’s first wife and Jane’s double. Gilbert and Gubar describe Bertha as “the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead” (360). Bertha is Brontë’s primary Gothic device in the novel. She uses the mad Bertha to manifest Jane’s repressed passion without Jane having to be held accountable for it.

Gilbert and Gubar cite several examples in which Bertha’s actions are symbolic reflection of Jane’s will. In fact, they argue that “every one of Bertha’s appearances—or, more accurately, her manifestations—has been associated with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane’s part” (360). One example is when Bertha enters Jane’s bedroom at night and tears her wedding veil. “Disliking the ‘vapoury veil’ of Jane Rochester,” Gilbert and Gubar argue, “Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha does it for her” (359). They continue, “Fearing the inexorable ‘bridal day,’ Jane would like to put it off. Bertha does that for her too” (359). And thirdly, “Resenting the new mastery of Rochester, who she sees as ‘*dread* but adored,’ (ital. ours), she wishes to



be his equal in size and strength, so that she can battle him in the contest of their marriage. Bertha, ‘a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband,’ has the necessary ‘virile force’ (chap. 26)” (359-360). The most notable instance of Bertha acting for Jane is when Bertha burns down Thornfield. Gilbert and Gubar comment, “Jane’s profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester’s mastery and of her own servitude, will be acted out by Bertha, who burns down the house and destroys *herself* in the process as if she were an agent of Jane’s desire as well as her own” (360). Each act of Bertha’s can be seen as a reflection of Jane’s will, yet something she cannot carry out herself because of society’s restrictions.

Jane is not conscious of the desires that Bertha represents, of course. She has internalized the angel ideology so that now she herself reinforces the wish for social respectability. Back when Jane was a child, this was not the case. She flailed violently; she spoke her disapproval freely; she shrieked wildly; and she indulged in excesses of passion to the point of fainting. As a child, Jane did not suppress her true will: she spoke or enacted it plainly. After meeting Helen, however, Jane convinces herself that she must improve herself in order to meet with God’s approval. She consequently suppresses most of her immediate impulses. However, instead of erasing Jane’s passionate side, Brontë displaces it onto Bertha. Bertha’s symbolic enactment of Jane’s will is a device of the New Gothic literature of which *Jane Eyre* is a part.

### PASSION VS. REASON

\* \* \* \* \*

The expression of passion, whether displaced or not, is almost entirely absent from the works of Jane Austen, a point on which Charlotte Brontë criticized her



predecessor. Jane Eyre is able to express her sexuality through passionate outbursts, but by adopting the angel in the house ideology, she also represses her sexuality much more than Austen heroines, which makes the passionate outbursts necessary. Jane makes passionate speeches when her repressive angelic tendencies fail her. Austen's heroines are able to avoid this overflow for two reasons. First, Austen's heroines are able to channel their sexuality through witty banter, whereas Jane Eyre does not make use of such a channel for her sexuality. Secondly, Austen's heroines can contain their sexuality because Austen largely deletes sexuality from her characters' make-up. She treats only outward decorum or the lack thereof and does not give attention to the inner tumult that many women experience. Brontë, on the other hand, pays particular attention to the passionate inner tumult inside Jane Eyre.

Just as witty banter was an assertion of power in Austen's novels, so is passionate expression in *Jane Eyre*. Jane has passionate outbursts when she cannot contain the injury she feels at being treated unjustly, as in the previously discussed exchanges she has with John Reed, Mrs. Reed, and Rochester. Jane will not tolerate unjust treatment, especially as a child but still as an adult, so when she is not being given her due, she protests in passionate form. Austen's heroines, on the contrary, use the more reserved device of reason to assert their power. Passion is viewed as a weakness in Austen's world, not an effective way to gain influence. Heroines in Austen's world must assert intellectual power through superior reasoning.

Although Brontë privileges passion, she does not completely delete reason from her novel. On the contrary, Jane makes frequent use of reason, especially when interacting with the two prominent men in her life, Rochester and St. John Rivers. The



difference between Brontë and Austen is that Brontë does not exalt reason as Austen does. Jane does not make a point to call herself a “rational creature,” like Elizabeth (Austen, Pride and Prejudice, 91). Instead, Jane uses reason to her advantage without much display.

A notable instance when Jane makes use of reason in dialogue with St. John Rivers is when he proposes marriage to her. St. John assumes that he knows better than Jane what she is suited to and what path is right for her, but Jane combats his arguments with reason. When Jane says she will go to India with St. John to work as a missionary, but only as his adopted sister and not as his wife, St. John replies that that is impossible because they would arouse suspicion, and so they must marry: “[P]ractical obstacles oppose themselves to any other plan. Do you not see it, Jane? Consider a moment – your strong sense will guide you” (451). But when Jane does apply reason, she decides, “[S]till my sense, such as it was, directed me only to the fact that we did not love each other as a man and wife should; and therefore it inferred we ought not to marry” (451). When Jane suggests that perhaps she disguise herself as a man to avoid public suspicion, St. John condescendingly replies, “[T]hough you have a man’s vigorous brain, you have a woman’s heart—it would not do” (454). In response to this, Jane calls him on his unmerited bigotry: “‘It would do,’ I affirmed with some disdain, ‘perfectly well. I have a woman’s heart; but not where you are concerned; for you I have only a comrade’s constancy; a fellow-soldier’s frankness, fidelity, fraternity, if you like...’” (454). Never supposing that his judgement could be flawed, St. John persists in his persuasion: “‘Jane, you would not repent marrying me; be certain of that; we *must* be married. I repeat it: there is no other way; and undoubtedly enough of love would follow upon marriage to



render the union right even in your eyes'" (454). However, Jane still uses her own reason: "'I scorn your idea of love.... I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St John, and I scorn you when you offer it'" (454). Jane knows her own evaluation of the situation to be better than St. John's and will not submit to his wishes simply because he is a man and supposes that he can judge situation better than she.

Jane also uses reason in her interactions with Rochester. Between them, however, the discrepancy between sound reason and ill reason is so great that it highlights Rochester's irrationality. One example is when Jane saves Rochester from being burnt in his bed by Bertha. After all is well, Jane turns to go, to which Rochester exclaims, "'What! you *will* go?'" (171). Jane replies, very sensibly, "'I am cold, sir'" (171). Rochester, becoming reasonable for a moment, replies, "'Cold? Yes, – and standing in a pool! Go, then, Jane; go!'" (171). Yet, to contradict this statement, Rochester still holds onto Jane's hand. She must invent an excuse for Rochester to allow her to go: "'I think I hear Mrs Fairfax move, sir...'" (171). Finally, Rochester releases her: "'Well, leave me: he relaxed his fingers, and I was gone'" (171). While Jane is using perfectly sound reason in this situation, Rochester is clearly being very irrational. He is, of course, very disturbed by almost being burnt in his bed, but he is disturbed this way not infrequently.

Brontë's irrational depiction of Rochester carries great significance, given the time in which she was writing. In the nineteenth century, man was associated with the mind and reason, whereas woman was associated with the body and emotion; St. John demonstrates this social mindset in his condescending treatment of Jane when she refuses his offer of marriage. By making the central male character within the novel highly irrational, Brontë divorces man from reason. He no longer has sole claim to it. But



Brontë does not claim reason as women's territory, as Austen does; she instead wants little to do with it. Brontë privileges passion over reason. An intensely feeling person in *Jane Eyre* is more fully human than one who resorts always to cold, calculating reason. This is evident in how Jane and Rochester are much more favorably drawn than St. John Rivers. Since reason is deemphasized, Rochester's irrationality is not a negative trait. It only serves the purpose of removing him from his established seat of authority. Both Jane and Rochester experience passion equally intensely, so both are in touch with the depth of their human emotions, and for this Brontë favors them.

### PATRIARCHY CRIPPLED

\* \* \* \* \*

Brontë's divorce of man from reason is part of her heavy critique of patriarchy. Unlike in Austen's novels, there are no ideal patriarchs in *Jane Eyre*, only the well intentioned and the ill intentioned. For Brontë, patriarchy itself is flawed, so even the benevolent patriarchs are incapable of justice; the institution of patriarchy inherently causes the abuse of power.

John Reed is the first patriarch to enter Jane Eyre's life. As such, he sets her initial standard for a patriarch as abusive, unkind, and dominating. John Reed, or his family, owns everything at Gateshead, whereas Jane, a dependant, does not even own herself because she lives off her relatives' support. John thinks that, as lord of all, he has a right to do whatever he likes with Jane. Thus, he strikes her when he pleases and tells her nasty things. John is the novel's first example of the flaw within the system of patriarchy. If men own everything and women nothing, then they are predisposed to be tyrants. More benevolent patriarchs, recognizing tyrannical urges, try to counteract them.



But within the system of patriarchy, nothing prevents men from abusing their power the way John does.

This early experience in Jane's life perhaps forms the basis for her fears later on of marrying Rochester as a social inferior. Jane sees at Gateshead that because she owns nothing, she has no power and is entirely at the mercy of those who are the owners. This is manifested, for example, when Jane gets locked in the red-room. The incident begins with a confrontation between John and Jane. "'What were you doing behind the curtain?'" John demands of her (17). She replies that she was reading a book, to which he responds:

'You have no business to take our books; you are a dependant, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they *are* mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years.' (17)

Obviously, Jane cannot help being a financial drain to the Reeds at this point in her life. Jane cannot go out into the world as a child and support herself. Her parents have died, so the only family she has is the Reeds. Yet, John denies that she has any right to education or even to be in his house in the first place. He implies that she is inherently less deserving of food and shelter because she is his social inferior.

The confrontation between John and Jane escalates to a physical level, and when John's sisters run to get Mrs. Reed, she immediately blames Jane, even though the confrontation was not in the least her fault. Mrs. Reed will not believe that her own



children could ever be at fault, especially when Jane is available to blame. Jane has no say in the matter. It does not matter whether she was really in the wrong or not; the same consequences would result.

When Jane is sent away from Gateshead for her unruly behavior, she meets the next malevolent patriarch to enter her life: Mr. Brocklehurst. Merely hearing Mrs. Reed's criticism of Jane, Mr. Brocklehurst immediately labels her as a "bad child" without waiting to form his own opinion (73). When Jane accidentally drops her slate, attracting Mr. Brocklehurst's attention, he berates her in front of the entire class:

'[I]t [is] my duty to warn you that this girl, who might be one of God's own lambs, is a little castaway: not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien. You must be on her guard against her; you must shun her example: if necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse. Teachers, you must watch her: keep your eyes on her movements, weigh well her words, scrutinize her actions, punish her body to save her soul; ... this girl is – a liar!' (78)

Even if Mr. Brocklehurst had reason to believe Mrs. Reed's estimation of Jane, he clearly goes beyond a standard warning that he might feel morally compelled to issue to Jane's teachers and fellow students. He essentially tells them to form a poor opinion of her from the start, giving her no chance to mend any faults, and to exclude her entirely from their company. Rather than wishing for Jane to improve her faults, he merely wishes to punish her.



The first benevolent patriarch to enter Jane's life is Rochester. He takes an interest in her and is kind to her. He enjoys holding discussions with her, appreciates her talents, and values her judgement. Yet, despite Rochester's good intentions, he cannot help sometimes being manipulative toward Jane. When he falls in love with her, he pretends to court Miss Ingram instead, because he "'wished to render you as madly in love with me as I was with you: and I knew jealousy would be the best ally I could call in for the furtherance of that end'" (295). Rochester does not mean to be cruel to Jane, but in his selfish aim, he nonetheless causes her pain with thoughts that the man she loves cannot be her husband. Rochester often cannot think beyond his own selfish gratification to Jane's good. When Jane does not comply with Rochester's wishes, it destabilizes him so much that he even grows violent. For example, when she makes up her mind to flee Thornfield, she tells Rochester so, and he tries desperately to dissuade her. Thinking only of himself and not of Jane's reputation, salvation, or sense of self-worth, he asks her to become his mistress. When she persistently refuses, Rochester cries, "'Jane! Will you hear reason?' (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear) 'because, if you won't, I'll try violence'" (340). Rochester is such an unstable character that he cannot help threatening Jane in an attempt to prevent losing her. He uses every manipulation available to him *because* he loves her so much. As a patriarch, Rochester is used to being in power and getting his own way. He does not have the ability to put Jane's well being before his own. The institution of patriarchy conditions him to think only of his own comfort and happiness.

St. John is also a benevolent patriarch, but he too abuses his power. In trying to persuade Jane to marry him and join him in his missionary work, he gives her his honest



yet insulting estimation of her: “‘God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not love’” (448). Jane has right to be insulted by this remark, both because St. John should not express such a thing so openly to her and because she knows she is in fact capable of obtaining a man’s love, a more intense love than St. John is probably capable of feeling. Again, as a patriarch St. John feels that he always knows better than Jane, even in matters about herself. He insults her both with his remarks and with the way he views Jane.

Brontë’s critique of patriarchy comes across strongly throughout the novel and almost entirely without reserve. Another strong aspect of this critique is the conditions under which Jane marries Rochester. Brontë structures the plot so that Jane does not marry Rochester until she is financially independent. When at first they are to be married, the surfacing of the knowledge that Rochester already has a wife prevents the ceremony from being carried out. This stops Jane from marrying Rochester and remaining in a state of financial dependence. During their engagement, she already begins to dislike how he fawns over her with his money: “‘Oh, sir! – nevermind jewels! I don’t like to have them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange.’” (291). However, had Bertha not been an obstacle, Jane would have married Rochester in her state of financial dependence, something she has deplored since childhood.

Even after Jane discovers that Rochester is married to Bertha, he asks that she pretend to be his wife just the same in a foreign country where no one would know. Jane refuses for moral reasons, but this too is a device to prevent her from being in a relationship with Rochester as his dependent. She flees Thornfield and does not return



until after inheriting a fortune of her own. Jane's professed conditions for marrying Rochester are that Bertha no longer be his wife; yet, Brontë specifically manipulates the plot so that Jane is financially independent before marrying him. Jane inherits her fortune right before returning to Rochester. She supports herself during the rest of the novel alternately as a teacher and a governess; thus, there is no reason that she needs to inherit the fortune other than gaining financial independence as a prerequisite to marrying Rochester.

In the new relationship between Jane and Rochester at the end of the novel, she is no longer his dependent or social inferior. Additionally, he is physically subordinate to her, due to being crippled in the fire at Thornfield, and therefore must depend on Jane to help him with daily tasks. In a sense, then, Jane's and Rochester's roles are reversed. Whereas Jane was initially dependent on Rochester, now he is dependent on her. This makes Brontë's critique of patriarchy very strong indeed. Her novel does not argue merely for equality between men and women, socially and financially, but actually for women to dominate men. However, Brontë subverts this argument at the very end of the novel. While at one point Jane says, "I was ... his vision.... He saw nature – he saw books through me....," this changes a few paragraphs later (500). "[H]e eventually recovered the sight of that one eye," Jane reports (501). "He cannot now see very distinctly: he cannot read or write much; but he can find his way without being led by the hand: the sky is no longer a blank to him – the earth no longer a void" (501). Whereas Jane was in the position of authority before, Rochester is now gradually regaining his autonomy.



This last-minute subversion of Brontë's strongest critique of patriarchy goes along with Jane's, and by extension Brontë's, warring between angel behavior and passionate expression throughout the novel. *Jane Eyre* does not reach a settled state; it remains in flux the entire time. Brontë often is on the verge of a very strong critique, whether in Jane's passionate expression or in Rochester's state of dependence, but she always prevents it from having full impact. She cripples patriarchy but does not completely obliterate it. I can only conclude that certain urges within Brontë longed to make a more radical critique but that her internalized Victorian values censored them with an aim toward social and Christian respectability.

## Emily Brontë: A Soul away from Home

*"I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own."*

*Wuthering Heights, p. 117*

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë more radically critiques women's established roles than her sister Charlotte does. Emily includes Christianity in her critique, thus freeing her from the enslaving Christian forbearance that pervades *Jane Eyre*. A critique of Christianity necessitates a critique of the angel in the house ideology as well, and in fact the depiction of Catherine Earnshaw is a reaction against that ideology. While



Charlotte Brontë also critiques the angel in the house ideology, Jane in fact internalizes some angel aspects; thus, Emily's critique of the ideology is much more severe.

Emily Brontë's critique of patriarchy is also much more severe than her sister's. Whereas Charlotte recognized benevolent and malevolent forms of an inherently flawed institution, for Emily patriarchy can never be benevolent. It has a possessive force over the male characters of the novel, inducing them toward wickedness. In this way, patriarchy in *Wuthering Heights* can be said to have a demonic quality to it. It possesses the male characters and then influences them toward cruelty.

### THE PATRIARCHAL DEMON

\* \* \* \* \*

*Wuthering Heights* undoubtedly carries a haunted quality in its pages. It is literally haunted with Catherine's ghost, who appears to Lockwood in a dream. More importantly, however, the novel is haunted with the cruelty exhibited by the patriarchal figures, Heathcliff especially. Heathcliff appears unimaginably cruel throughout most of the novel, particularly to his wife, Isabella, who writes to Nelly soon after marrying Heathcliff, "I do hate him—I am wretched—I have been a fool!" (145). However, although Heathcliff is the most prominent cruel patriarch in the novel, it is important to note he is not the only one. Catherine Earnshaw's brother Hindley has his cruel moments as well, and while their father is not cruel, traces of manipulative behavior can be found in him too. The manipulative and abusive force of patriarchy is passed down from one male character to the next throughout the novel. Patriarchy can be seen as a demon that possesses and consumes one male character after another, proceeding down a line of succession and leaving ruined men in its path.



At the earliest chronological point narrated in the novel, the patriarchal demon possesses Mr. Earnshaw. He does not seem so evil as the successive patriarchs, but he still exhibits manipulative behavior in preferring Heathcliff over his own son:

[F]rom the very beginning he [Heathcliff] bred bad feeling in the house; and at Mrs. Earnshaw's death, which happened less than two years after, the young master [Hindley] had learnt to regard his father as an oppressor rather than a friend, and Heathcliff as a usurper of his parent's affections and his privileges, and he grew bitter with brooding over these injuries.

(36)

Mr. Earnshaw making Heathcliff a favorite may seem harmless enough, but it deprives Hindley of the parental love he needs. Mr. Earnshaw becomes an "oppressor" to Hindley, making him feel inferior and unworthy of his love. This causes resentment to build in Hindley, preparing him to be the successor to the patriarchal demon.

When Mr. Earnshaw dies, Hindley succeeds him as the chief patriarch in the novel. The abusive nature of patriarchal power exhibits itself much more in Hindley than it did in his father, for Hindley has an object against which to seek revenge. When he returns home from school after his father's death, Nelly says: "... Hindley became tyrannical. ... He drove him [Heathcliff] from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labour out of doors instead, compelling him to do so as hard as any other lad on the farm" (44). Heathcliff does not deserve such treatment from Heathcliff; he never wronged him in any way. Heathcliff is only guilty of being Mr. Earnshaw's favorite, which he could not help. Yet Hindley abuses his power and degrades Heathcliff to try to make up for being powerless



and oppressed before. Consequently, Heathcliff fosters similar resentment for Hindley as Hindley fostered for his father, only Heathcliff's resentment is much greater. He says to Nelly, "'I'm trying to settle how I shall pay Hindley back. I don't care how long I wait, if I can only do it, at last. I hope he will not die before I do!'" (60). Whereas Hindley's revenge on Heathcliff was sparked by his wife's dislike for him, Heathcliff is forming an elaborate plot for revenge long before he ever has the power to enact it.

At this point, the patriarchal demon begins to possess Heathcliff, although the transfer takes a bit longer than it did from Mr. Earnshaw to Hindley. Hindley takes up alcohol and begins a slow demise, which Heathcliff delights in thoroughly: "He delighted to witness Hindley degrading himself past redemption..." (65). Nelly also notes, "And, truly, it appeared as if the lad [Heathcliff] *were* possessed of something diabolical at that period" (65). Even Nelly observes that Heathcliff becomes possessed by something diabolical, although it is not merely for a short period, as Nelly states; Heathcliff exhibits cruelty throughout his reign as chief patriarch.

The true shift of the balance of power begins when Heathcliff returns after disappearing for three years. He has made a fortune for himself and begins to gamble with Hindley, who slowly loses his own fortune to Heathcliff: "'There were some persons sitting at cards—Heathcliff joined them; my brother lost some money to him; and, finding him plentifully supplied, he requested that he would come again in the evening, to which he consented'" (98). Unfortunately for Hindley, he does not win his money back, but rather keeps losing money to Heathcliff until the latter owns Wuthering Heights.

In Heathcliff's reign as patriarch, he becomes more manipulative and abusive than Hindley or Mr. Earnshaw ever were. It is easy to view Heathcliff as an inherently bad



man, and several characters in the novel view him that way. However, early on Heathcliff was a fairly morally upright boy. He would stoically endure abuse from almost everyone in the family without lashing out in return. Nelly confesses the way they all treated him:

... Hindley hated him, and to say the truth I did the same; and we plagued and went on with him shamefully, for I wasn't reasonable enough to feel my injustice, and the mistress never put in a word on his behalf, when she saw him wronged.

He seemed a sullen, patient child; hardened, perhaps, to ill-treatment: he would stand Hindley's blows without winking or shedding a tear, and my pinches moved him only to draw in a breath and open his eyes, as if he had hurt himself by accident and nobody was to blame. (36)

Nelly's bias seeps into her description of these events. Since Heathcliff bore all their abuse with such little display and no retaliation, she concludes that he was "sullen" and "hardened." With continual abuse, however, resentment is bred in Heathcliff. Despite her prejudice against Heathcliff, Nelly admits, "[Hindley's] treatment of ... [Heathcliff] was enough to make a fiend of a saint" (65). Heathcliff began life as a decent human being, but with sustained abuse he builds up tremendous resentment, which he unleashes when he finally ascends to the role of chief patriarch.

The patriarchal demon reaches its culmination in Heathcliff. Several points throughout the novel exhibit his deep-seated cruelty. The first time we meet Heathcliff, he snaps at his daughter-in-law, Catherine Linton, the daughter of the elder Catherine: "And you, you worthless.... You shall pay me for the plague of having you eternally in



my sight—do you hear me, damnable jade?’” (28). From the start, we form a negative impression of Heathcliff, wary of a man who would use such invective language with his own daughter-in-law.

Throughout the novel, Heathcliff’s cruel acts are reinforced by other characters constantly referring to him as a devil. The very day Heathcliff arrives at Wuthering Heights as a child, Mr. Earnshaw associates him with the devil, although seemingly innocently: “[I]t’s [Heathcliff is] as dark almost as if it came from the devil” (34). Later on, as an innocent child, Hindley’s son Hareton refers to Heathcliff as “[d]evil daddy” (109). Isabella also makes this association: “[I]s he a devil?” (136). Even Catherine compares Heathcliff to a devil—in fact, to *the* Devil: “‘Well, I won’t repeat my offer of a wife—It is as bad as offering Satan a lost soul’” (112). Heathcliff’s evilness is heavily reinforced throughout the novel in this way.

Nonetheless, Heathcliff is fundamentally a victim. He is constantly defined as an inferior, due both to his dark skin and his savage, uncivilized character. Other characters defining him as wicked or devil-like also reinforces his inferiority. Heathcliff must fight from the bottom to gain any power or social influence, and when he finally is in possession of this power, it in turn possesses him. Heathcliff must constantly exert his power to abusive degrees to try to retaliate for his earlier inferiority—just as Hindley did to Heathcliff. The abuse is so much out of Heathcliff’s control that he cannot even help hurting Catherine, the love of his life. In the last scene between Heathcliff and Catherine before she dies, Heathcliff makes bitter accusations:

‘Why did you despise me? Why did you betray your own heart, Cathy? I have not one word of comfort—you deserve this. You have killed



yourself. ... You loved me—then what *right* had you to leave me? What right—answer me—for the poor fancy you felt for Linton? Because misery, degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart—you have broken it—and in breaking it, you have broken mine.’ (161)

Heathcliff’s accusations are harsh, but they are full of torment. “[W]hat *right* had you to leave me,” he asks vehemently. Though he is angry with Catherine, it is not because of how she has injured him alone; rather, it is because her marriage to Linton ruined their chance for mutual happiness. In fact, Heathcliff is more upset with Catherine for hurting herself than for hurting him: “‘I love *my* murderer—but *yours*! How can I?’” (161). The full extent of Heathcliff’s resentment and torment comes across in his dialogue with Catherine. He resents her for what she has done to herself and to their chance for happiness, but at the same time his every harsh word is laced with a sorrowful tenderness. Despite all Heathcliff’s bitterness, his immense love still unmistakably comes across.

Heathcliff dies at the end of the novel, but the patriarchal demon does not die with him. From the time Hareton is a young child, he lives with Heathcliff, preparing to be his successor as the chief patriarch. That Heathcliff will receive charge of Hareton is foreshadowed when Hindley accidentally drops Hareton over the banister and he literally falls into Heathcliff’s arms (74). Heathcliff’s influence over Hareton soon begins to show. When Nelly visits Wuthering Heights, she meets a wild, cursing Hareton, much different from the sweet child she knew not long ago:



He raised his missile to hurl it; I commenced a soothing speech, but could not stay his hand. The stone struck my bonnet, and then ensued, from the stammering lips of the little fellow, a string of curses which, whether he comprehended them or not, were delivered with practiced emphasis, and distorted his baby features into a shocking expression of malignity. (109)

Heathcliff is rearing Hareton to follow in his footsteps, so after Heathcliff dies, the patriarchal demon possesses Hareton.

The demonic form that patriarchy takes in *Wuthering Heights* may be seen as a comment on how the abusive institution of patriarchy possessed the Victorian England as a whole. The abuse that each patriarch in the novel inflicts stems from his desperation to assert or maintain power rather than from cold calculation. The novel comments that as a hierarchy of power, patriarchy necessarily provokes this abuse. Each successive incarnation of the patriarchal demon in *Wuthering Heights* is more abusive and tyrannical, indicating that the institution of patriarchy is becoming more tyrannical. Although both Charlotte and Emily Brontë view patriarchy as an inherently flawed system, Emily's critique is much more severe since benevolence is nearly impossible in conjunction with patriarchy in *Wuthering Heights*.

#### A PERVERSION OF THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE

\* \* \* \* \*

Complementing her critique of patriarchy is Emily Brontë's critique of the angel in the house ideology. Unlike Jane Eyre who internalizes some aspects of the angel in the house ideology, the character of Catherine Earnshaw is a perversion of the angel stereotype. After Jane meets Helen Burns, she represses her passion to a degree and self-



polices herself to a fair degree. Catherine, on the other hand, is suppressed rather than repressed. She does not self-police, as Jane does; rather, her passionate displays constantly clash with the society around her.

From the start, Catherine is a wild, passionate, unrestrained child. Nelly describes her thus:

Certainly, she had ways with her such as I never saw a child take up before; and she put all of us past our patience fifty times and oftener in a day: from the hour she came down stairs till the hour she went to bed, we had not a minute's security that she wouldn't be in mischief. Her spirits were always at high-water mark, her tongue always going—singing, laughing, and plaguing everybody who would not do the same. A wild, wick slip she was.... (40)

Soon, however, Catherine has to spend five weeks at Thrushcross Grange to heal after hurting herself there. At the Grange, among the highly civilized Lintons, Catherine discovers that she is praised for being tame and polite, so is sufficiently encouraged to refine her manners. However, when she returns to Wuthering Heights, her rudeness and wildness return. She only displays refined manners when it is in her interest to do so:

Catherine had kept up her acquaintance with the Lintons since her five weeks' residence among them; and as she had no temptation to show her rough side in their company, and had the sense to be ashamed of being rude where she experienced such invariable courtesy, she imposed unwittingly on the old lady and gentleman, by her ingenuous cordiality; gained the admiration of Isabella, and the heart and soul of her brother—



acquisitions that flattered her from the first, for she was full of ambition—  
and led her to adopt a double character without exactly intending to  
deceive anyone. (66)

Catherine's manners are clearly a front; she acts the part when it is to her advantage but returns to her rough and rude ways when she can get away with it.

However, Catherine is not a perfect actress; her wild and uncivilized nature betrays itself during one of Edgar Linton's visits to Wuthering Heights. Annoyed with Nelly, Catherine pinches her hard on the arm. When Nelly cries out and accuses her, Catherine denies doing anything, for she does not believe Edgar has seen her. Edgar saw perfectly, however, and is horrified at witnessing this behavior in a girl he thought was so well mannered. Catherine next turns her attack to little Hareton, and when Edgar tries to separate them, she strikes him as well. Completely overwhelmed, Edgar tries to leave, but Catherine grasps the door handle to prevent him: ““No, ... not yet, Edgar Linton—sit down, you shall not leave me in that temper. I should be miserable all night, and I won't be miserable for you!”” (71). Catherine tries to force her way, as she is accustomed to doing at home. She is also quite frank that she wishes to resolve things for her own selfish interest and that she does not view Edgar as someone worth causing her misery. Yet Edgar simply replies, ““Can I stay after you have struck me?”” (71). Edgar never conceived that he might be hit by this girl, and the act puts him in such utter shock and disbelief that he does not want to associate with Catherine a moment longer. However, Edgar's resolve is not very strong, and he is finally persuaded to stay, whereupon Catherine convinces him once again that she is a civilized young lady.



The above scene, however, shows that Catherine is anything but a civilized young lady. She is almost the complete opposite of an angel in the house. Catherine is not patient or forbearing; she is not gentle; she is not submissive; and she is anything but self-effacing. She tries to mimic these qualities in front of the Lintons, for her five-week stay with them made her crave material finery and social position. These were not even in Catherine's thoughts before her stay with the Lintons. As a wild and free child running through the moors, Catherine had no use for such things as wealth and social power.

Once Catherine learns to want material wealth and social importance, however, it corrupts her investment in her relationship with Heathcliff. Catherine no longer considers Heathcliff worth marrying, as he is not her social equal: "It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now.... [D]id it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars? ..." (80-81). Catherine is now concerned with social position, which leads her to accept a marriage proposal from Edgar Linton. Yet, she admits, "I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there [Hindley] had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it" (80).

When Nelly questions Catherine as to why she wants to marry Edgar, she makes no attempt to conceal her materialistic motives: "Well, because he is handsome, and pleasant to be with. ... And because he is young and cheerful. ... And, because he loves me. ... And he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband" (77-78). Catherine's answers are shockingly frank, but they are no less noble than most Victorian women's reasons for marrying. Catherine is simply more honest about her motives than most



Victorian women would dare to be. It was expected that women should try to marry advantageously, both in terms of wealth and social position. They were expected to love the man whose marriage proposal they accepted, but viewing him as “handsome,” “pleasant to be with,” and “young and cheerful” would certainly be considered a strong enough love with such a socially advantageous match as Catherine is making. Victorian women were not expected to feel ardent passion for their husbands; rather, passion was discouraged and constant affection favored.

Catherine’s passion, however, is very much apparent. When Nelly asks Catherine, in this same conversation about her material ambitions, where she perceives an obstacle in marrying Edgar after all the reasons she has presented, she replies impassionedly, “‘*Here!* and *here!*’ ... striking one hand on her forehead, and the other on her breast. ‘In whichever place the soul lives—in my soul, and in my heart, I’m convinced I’m wrong!’” (79). A bit later, she continues:

‘My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff’s great miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning; my great thought in living is himself. If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be; and, if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger. I should not seem a part of it. (82)

Catherine clearly is anything but a demure, modest, obedient angel in the house. Instead she is the polar opposite. However, although all Victorian women were supposed to be naturally self-effacing and submissive like angels, they probably were actually closer to Catherine. Of course, they would repress their passion much more than Catherine does;



but under their patient and proper exterior, they probably experienced very tumultuous emotions, all the wilder for being repressed.

### ARELIGIOUS SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

\* \* \* \* \*

As noted in the discussion of *Jane Eyre*, Christianity is an inseparable aspect of the angel in the house ideology. Whereas Charlotte Brontë upholds Christianity in her novel, Emily Brontë includes it in her critique, thus making for a stronger critique of the angel ideology as well. Both Charlotte and Emily Brontë are concerned with the spiritual liberation of their heroines, but whereas Charlotte's idea of spiritual liberation is set in specifically Christian terms, Emily's is areligious. Emily essentially rejects Christianity in *Wuthering Heights*, so spiritual liberation for Catherine has more to do with a Romantic sense of self-growth, awakening, and transcendence.

Several small details throughout the novel indicate a critique of Christianity. For example, from the very beginning of the novel, we learn that Catherine has kept a journal on the pages of a Bible (Brontë, Emily, 18; Salotto, ENGL 104). To write in a Bible is itself sacrilegious; moreover, Catherine is superimposing her story over the story of the Bible. This image is a powerful critique of the institution of Christianity. Brontë's levity with the Scripture is a drastic step away from the moralizing angel in the house ideology of her day. In addition to this image, Brontë's language in certain passages implies a critical tone toward Christianity, such as in the following description of the servant Joseph: "He was, and is yet, most likely, the wearisomest, self-righteous Pharisee that ever ransacked a Bible to rake the promises to himself and fling the curses on his neighbours" (40). Brontë most likely had certain people in mind of whom she did not



think highly when writing those words. Moreover, the statement implies that the Bible can be manipulated based on a person's own motives, thus compromising the purity and authority of the text. Both the image and this description of Joseph diminish the sacredness of Scripture.

Undoubtedly the strongest critique of Christianity within the novel, however, is the dream Catherine relates to Nelly about heaven: “[H]eaven did not seem my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy” (80). Alluding to *Paradise Lost*, Catherine, like Satan, has been thrown out of heaven; but whereas Satan's exile is full of torment, Catherine's is much desired. That Catherine does not *want* to go to heaven, that something better exists, is a weighty critique indeed. This implies, even more strongly than the previous examples, that Christianity does not have an infallible interpretation of the divine. Catherine wants nothing to do with the heaven that society describes because it is a heaven that requires her to suppress her passion while on earth in order to remain pure enough to enter. For Emily Brontë, however, passion ought not to be suppressed. Any institution that teaches women to suppress their passion is consequently a flawed institution. For Catherine, Romantic transcendence, represented by the heath, or moors, and Wuthering Heights, is a far better heaven to aspire to than one that suppresses passion. Through Catherine's dream, Brontë rejects the contemporary notion of heaven and alludes to a better alternative.

Catherine longs for the moors where she and Heathcliff would run wild as children. As a wild, unrestrained, and ethereal landscape that allows Catherine to be



wild, unrestrained, and ethereal herself, the moors are a prominent aspect of the sublime in the novel. However, after marrying Edgar Linton, Catherine is severed from those moors. She is caged in domestic life just as most Victorian women are after marriage. Any degree of freedom Catherine was permitted as a child is no longer allowed.

Edgar asserts his small degree of patriarchal influence when Heathcliff begins to visit Catherine after her marriage to Edgar. He tolerates Heathcliff for a while, but soon forbids him from returning to Thrushcross Grange:

‘I have so far been forbearing with you, sir...; not that I was ignorant of your miserable, degraded character, but I felt you were only partly responsible for that; and Catherine wishing to keep up your acquaintance, I acquiesced—foolishly. Your presence is a moral poison that would contaminate the most virtuous—for that cause, and to prevent worse consequences, I shall deny you, hereafter, admission to this house, and give notice, now, that I require your instant departure.’ (114)

As mild and unassertive as Edgar is, he still believes that he has a right to approve or deny what company Catherine may receive. Heathcliff was Catherine’s last link to the spiritual realm represented by the moors, and now that she is being denied his company, she is utterly imprisoned in her mundane domestic sphere. Thus, she resolves, “‘Well, if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend—if Edgar will be mean and jealous—I’ll try to break their hearts by breaking my own’” (117). Catherine’s only available means of freeing herself from domestic imprisonment is to destroy herself. She has no social or legal means for asserting her power over them, so she must work on their emotions.



Catherine decides first to try feigning illness to persuade Edgar to relent on his decision regarding Heathcliff: "... Nelly, say to Edgar, if you see him again to-night, that I'm in danger of being seriously ill—I wish it may prove true. He has startled and distressed me shockingly! I want to frighten him" (116). Catherine proceeds to put on a display in front of Edgar; however, Nelly thwarts this plan by telling Edgar that Catherine is merely pretending. Now Catherine must resort to really making herself ill. She shuts herself in her room and stops eating. Again, Catherine perhaps would succeed in making Edgar truly afraid and submissive to her every wish if Nelly did not interfere. Catherine cries to Nelly:

‘Among his books! ... And I dying! I on the brink of the grave! ...

Cannot you inform him that it is frightful earnest? Nelly, if it be not too late, as soon as I learn how he feels, I'll choose between these two—either to starve, at once, that would be no punishment unless he had a heart—or to recover and leave the country.’ (121)

Yet Nelly, still not taking Catherine seriously, replies, “‘Why, ma’am, ... the master has no idea of your being deranged; and, of course, he does not fear that you will let yourself die of hunger’” (121). Nelly still believes Catherine to be faking and therefore hides the fact that she is starving herself from Edgar. Thus Catherine must take her plot to the next level: “‘If I were only sure it would kill him, ... I'd kill myself directly!’” (121). Catherine now comes to the point where she is willing to die to assert her power over Edgar and free herself from her domestic cage.

Catherine does not simply starve herself to death, although that is how she initially inflicts her illness. Her death is associated with her giving birth to her daughter



Catherine, but that clearly is not the only cause either, as an element of spiritual destruction pervades her illness as well. Somehow not explicitly mentioned in the novel, her illness transfers from self-inflicted to beyond her control. Perhaps her three-day spell of starvation weakens her to the point where she is truly ill, or perhaps her domestic imprisonment drives her insane and that slowly weakens her to the point of death. Catherine clearly is disturbed to some degree: ““These three awful nights, I’ve never closed my lids—and oh, I’ve been tormented! I’ve been haunted, Nelly!”” (121-122). Also, although Catherine is a melodramatic type, the scene in which she sees an unfamiliar face in the mirror clearly goes beyond melodramatic display:

‘Don’t *you* see that face?’ she enquired, gazing earnestly at the mirror.

And, say what I could, I was incapable of making her comprehend it to be her own; so I rose and covered it with a shawl.

‘It’s behind there still!’ she pursued, anxiously. ‘And it stirred. Who is it? I hope it will not come out when you are gone! Oh! Nelly, the room is haunted! I’m afraid of being alone!’ (p. 123)

Catherine does not recognize her own face in the mirror because the angel ideology has begun to impose itself on her. She sees herself as the wife of Edgar Linton rather than as an autonomous being. Catherine’s spiritual self is disappearing as she becomes more and more locked into her domestic role.

Catherine’s death, partially self-inflicted, is her final act of freeing herself from her domestic cage, all other attempts having been unsuccessful. Life on earth for Catherine is nothing but a ““shattered prison,”” so her death is her escape and liberation



(160). “‘I’m tired of being enclosed here,’” she explains (160). “‘I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to always be there; not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart; but really with it, and in it’” (160). Catherine does not mean that she wishes to enter heaven, of course, because she has already said that she would not feel at home there. Rather, Catherine’s “glorious world” is the same spiritual realm represented by the moors; it is the place she and Heathcliff alone share. Indeed, even after she is dead, Catherine claims, “‘I shall not be at peace’” (159). Catherine will not truly reach her “glorious world” until Heathcliff can join her beyond the grave. However, her death now at least frees her from the ever-encroaching angel ideology. After she dies, Catherine haunts the moors until Heathcliff can join her.

Interestingly, Catherine’s spiritual liberation must include Heathcliff. It is not enough for her to simply reject the angel in the house ideology. Catherine makes it clear that she is not complete without Heathcliff. She exclaims at one point: “‘Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff—he’s always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure any more than I am always a pleasure to myself—but, as my own being—so, don’t talk of our separation again—it is impracticable...’” (82). Catherine implies a degree of gender obscurity by proclaiming that she is essentially the same person as Heathcliff. Despite Brontë’s severe critique of patriarchy, she does not villainize men. They are possessed by the patriarchal demon, which does not benefit them any more than it benefits women. Brontë’s ideal is for men and women to transcend beyond the mundane social world where the patriarchal demon has its influence and achieve spiritual liberation together. In this transcendence, they return to the realm represented by the moors, where they may be unrestricted by the chains that society imposes.



## Introduction to the American Novels

The literary climate in nineteenth-century America differed significantly from that of England, particularly with regard to women's writing. Whereas the turn of the nineteenth century in England brought a flourishing of feminist Enlightenment writers, the first half of the nineteenth century in America involved an established sentimentalist tradition in women's writing.

### SENTIMENTALISM

\* \* \* \* \*

In her work *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, Nina Baym explores this sentimentalist tradition in women's writing. Baym uses the term "woman's fiction" instead of "sentimentalism," which she finds degrading (xxix). She also finds the term inappropriate, arguing as follows:

[T]he authors of these fictions often advertised their work as anti-sentimental. For them the term denoted the genre of seduction novel in which emotional, narcissistic heroines came to ruin in their first encounter with opportunistic men. Authors of woman's fictions detested such books and projected their work as alternative or antidote. (xxix)



Though Baym convincingly argues against the use of the term “sentimentalism,” the novels she discusses have been widely categorized as such, so I will use the more common term. Moreover, Baym herself admits two implications of the word: “[T]hough it [sentimentalism] denotes private, excessive, undisciplined, self-centered emotionality, [it] also denotes public sympathy and benevolent fellow-feeling. Authors of woman’s fiction rejected sentimentalism in the former sense while celebrating the latter” (xxix-xxx). The categorization of the majority of early- to mid-nineteenth-century American women’s fiction as sentimentalism highlights this latter aspect of appealing to public sympathy, and it is this aspect that I also wish to highlight in my discussion of these works.

The majority of twenty-first-century readers who pick up any of the novels that Baym discusses most likely will be shocked at how far the novel falls below our current standards and conventions for quality literature. For one thing, they are very formulaic, all following a common plot pattern, and so they are not very original. Baym herself writes, “I must admit that woman’s fiction does not partake of the more obviously advanced thought of its day” (19). However, she argues that these works are still worth studying. According to Baym, they are important because of, not despite, their formulaic quality. That women from 1820 to 1870 kept writing essentially the same story over and over indicates that the common plot involves an issue that women of the time were universally concerned with and felt needed reiteration.

Baym argues that the common goal of sentimentalist fiction is to change the way women perceive themselves. The novels do this by tracking the psychological change of the heroine:



At the outset, she takes herself very lightly—has no ego, or a damaged one, and looks to the world to coddle and protect her. She makes demands on others as a function of not making demands on herself. She expects nothing from herself because she recognizes no inner capacities. ... [T]he failure of the world to satisfy either reasonable or unreasonable expectations awakens the heroine to inner possibilities. By the novel's end, she has developed a strong conviction of her own worth as a result of which she does ask much from herself. (19)

A common criticism of sentimental fiction is that through it women are actually self-policing their behavior and reinforcing their restrictive social roles. This literature is viewed as suppressive, not progressive. It is easy to view sentimental fiction this way because the heroines often concentrate on controlling their passions and accepting an unfair fate without rebelling. However, Baym argues that this literature is in fact progressive in a way. Women of the time viewed themselves negatively, incapable of accomplishing anything worthwhile, since they were deprived of any opportunity to do so. Sentimental fiction shows heroines who demonstrate moral superiority and thus acquire a sense of self-worth. The aim of such fiction, Baym argues, is that the women reading it will likewise strive for moral superiority and likewise gain the confidence that they are capable of good and have an indispensable role in society.

Baym identifies two types of women that sentimental fiction reacts against:

One of these was the passive woman—incompetent, ignorant, cowed, emotionally and intellectually undeveloped—whom they [sentimental writers] considered an anachronism from an earlier time. (The heroine's



mother is often such a type.) However touching her ineptness and anxiety to please, she sinks quickly under life's demands to an early death or a life of apathy, debility, and obscurity. (28)

This type of woman is clearly what sentimental writers wanted their sex to move beyond. The contrast of the heroine with her mother's "ineptness and anxiety to please" aims to show women the faults of the latter character type and the moral, social, and personal superiority of the former. Baym continues:

The second type, on whom the brunt of our authors' displeasure fell, is an apparent opposite to this sad case, the thoroughly 'modern' woman, the so-called 'belle' who lived for excitement and the admiration of the ballroom in the mistaken belief that such self-gratification was equivalent to power and influence. Unthinkingly she abetted and even stimulated the money system that was so inimical to true feminine and human fulfillment. Her needs and demands—for a larger house, luxurious furnishings, an expensive equipage, jewels and elaborate dress—required great sums of money, and the rage for money was the greatest threat to the dignity of woman's life and to the moral life of the entire nation. The cult of domesticity is a social concept that replaces the marketplace with the home, and the belle has given herself to the marketplace. (28)

This type of woman clearly is also contrary to the sentimentalists' aim. Although the belle does not self-police, she is not improving her status in society either. Instead, through her material greed, she is perpetuating the economic system that leaves her



dependent on men. Neither the belle nor the “passive woman” engages her mind. They both blindly mock a social stereotype.

The heroines in sentimental fiction may suppress their passions and discourage disobedience, but they do strengthen their will power and use their minds to perceive that prudence in the present may win them a reward in the future. In most sentimental novels, the heroines are rewarded in marrying well. They usually do not have control over bringing about the reward. Rather, the message in the novels is that exemplary behavior will eventually pay off because others will wish to reward it.

### THE “ANGEL IN THE HOUSE”

\* \* \* \* \*

The heroines in sentimental fiction clearly fall into the angel in the house stereotype. In “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” Barbara Welter discusses the form this stereotype took in America at the time the sentimentalists were writing:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. ... Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.

(21)

All four of these virtues can be seen in the heroines of sentimental fiction. They restrain their passions to remain pure; they submit to patriarchal commands; and they are paragons of domesticity; and through it all, they rely on God to sustain them through their



trials. However, sentimental fiction does challenge the angel in the house stereotype, as defined by Welter, in one aspect. Welter writes:

Woman understood her position if she was the right kind of woman, a true woman. 'She feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector,' declared George Burnap.... Or put even more strongly by Mrs. Sandford: 'A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of inferiority, and therefore grateful for support.' (28)

However, this is precisely what sentimental writers were trying to overcome. They wanted women to feel purposeful and capable, not weak and inferior. Sentimental writers encouraged women to be demure but not timid; modest but not conscious of inferiority. And they certainly encouraged nothing like weakness; rather, they promoted strength of will and forbearance. The sentimental writers, therefore, slightly revised the male-defined angel in the house. They still upheld the submissive exterior, but they attacked the associations of weakness and inferiority.

A novel revising the stereotype a step further than the bulk of sentimental fiction is Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*. The major new development in the plot of *Ruth Hall* is that the heroine moves out of the domestic sphere. Ruth begins the novel as the stereotypical submissive and self-effacing wife. She truly possesses the "sympathetic, nonjudgmental affection ... [that] helped offset the frustrations and strains a man suffered in his workplace," that Poovey describes of the ideal wife (*Proper Lady*, 10). However, Ruth's husband dies, and at the end of the novel she is unmarried with a career and a self-made fortune. This is a substantial step beyond the sentimental novels that end with a socially advantageous marriage, reinforcing the current social system. *Ruth Hall* still has strong



elements of sentimental fiction, most apparent in the characterization of the heroine, but Fern moves a step beyond her predecessors.

When looking strictly at the plot, *Ruth Hall* appears to be more progressive in some ways than *Jane Eyre* or even *Wuthering Heights*, for both Jane and Catherine end the novel in marriage, whereas Ruth does not. Likewise, Catherine never pursues a career, and even though Jane works as a schoolteacher and governess, she never does so for ambition or fortune but merely as a means of supporting herself while unmarried. Ruth, on the other hand, becomes an ambitious and shrewd writer who makes a fortune for herself (as contrasted with Jane who inherits money independent of any action on her part). However, other aspects of *Ruth Hall* lessen its progressive influence. For one thing, Ruth arrives at her state at the end of the novel through a series of coincidental and unlikely circumstances. Her husband dies and, through no fault of his own, leaves Ruth and their two children destitute. Ruth happens to have extremely uncharitable relations and in-laws who only grudgingly assist her, forcing her to find employment, which she surely would not have considered otherwise. Since Ruth is not a lower-class woman, she has difficulty finding work, for employers assume she is not desperate and believe the work would be beneath her. Only these circumstances could force her to muster the ambition to try her hand at writing. She turns out to be more successful than she ever would have imagined, and with the aid of an altruistic editor earns herself a fortune—for surely this paragon of domesticity would not be so business savvy to save herself from being cheated had she not fallen into the hands of the benevolent Mr. Walter, her editor. Even when Ruth has won herself fame and fortune through all her hard work, she says to her daughter, “[N]o happy woman ever writes” (175). This statement alone nearly



cancels Fern's revolutionary developments of the sentimental novel, for it implies that even after Ruth has achieved a happy and stable life through her career as a writer, she would still rather be a happy homemaker for her husband Harry, suppressing all her own complaints and striving only for his comfort.

Even though Ruth's character is a drawback from the novel's progressive potential in some ways, making her a stereotypical angel in the house does some positive things for the novel. Fern most likely made Ruth such a hyperbolic stereotype in order to win her audience's approval. Mid-nineteenth-century American society, when Fern was writing, set out very strict standards for a proper woman, and even if most real women fell far short of those ideals, they nonetheless had the standards ingrained in their heads as what was to be expected. Had Ruth been more realistically drawn, she likely would have met censure from her audience. Making Ruth the stereotypical angel enables Fern to get her audience to accept her more radical ending. By Ruth denying that she would want a career or fortune of her own, Fern can give it to her without society's castigation. Likewise, Fern appeases her audience by suggesting that Ruth and Mr. Walter will eventually marry, and in so doing she can end the novel before actually carrying out the marriage. Thus, *Ruth Hall* is not as radical a social critique as *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, overall, but neither is it as conservative as it may superficially appear. Fern uses the conservative elements in order to gain social acceptance of a more radical ending.

## ROMANTICISM

\* \* \* \* \*

Both *Ruth Hall* and earlier sentimental fiction do not pay much attention to the craft of writing. Fern herself dismisses the importance of artistic integrity to her writing:



'When the frost curtains the windows, when the wind whistles fiercely at the key hole, when the bright fire glows, and the tea-tray is removed, and father in his slippered feet lolls in his arm-chair; and mother with her thimble needle "makes auld claes look amaist as weel as new," and grandmamma draws closer to the chimney-corner, and Tommy with his plate of chestnuts nestles contentedly at her feet; then let my unpretending story be read. For such an hour, for such an audience, was it written.

Should any *dictionary on legs* rap inopportunately at the door for admittance, send him away to the groaning shelves of some musty library, where "literature" lies embalmed, with its stony eyes, fleshless joints, and ossified heart, in faultless preservation.' (Baym 32-33)

Baym notes that it took until the 1870s for women to strive to be considered artists (32). When they did, however, they followed the influences of American Romanticism, redefining it to include women.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the forerunner of the American Romanticism. His essays were widely influential and inspiring. He encouraged self-reliance, originality of thought, and a spiritual connection with nature. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson writes:

In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger



will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our opinion from another.

Here Emerson encourages others to prize their original ideas over the imitation of great works already published. “Imitation is suicide,” Emerson writes in the same essay.

However, he specifically addresses men in this essay, as well as in his others. Emerson supported women’s suffrage, but he did not explicitly encourage women to aspire to the same spiritual, intellectual, and artistic achievements as men (Colemancurry). In *The Awakening*, Chopin takes Emerson’s ideas and applies them directly to a woman.

Another important idea in Emerson’s essays is spiritual communion with nature, both for inspiration and for personal spiritual fulfillment. This is exemplified in his famous “transparent eye-ball” passage: “Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” Here Emerson describes a moment during which he ascends to Godlike creative power. He transcends his identity as a human being and all the social baggage that goes along with our lives on earth. When he transcends to his Godlike state, he has enormous creative potential. This description nicely encapsulates the solipsistic aspect of Romanticism, in which writers promote concern foremost or only with oneself, abandoning all the petty social responsibilities. This perspective redistributes priorities; it is anti-social, viewing the mundane tasks of ordinary, everyday existence as vices that enslave the mind and placing much higher



importance on self-awareness and spiritual growth. Romantic solipsism will be crucial to understanding Chopin's characterization of Edna in *The Awakening*.

Edna must be received within the assumptions of Romanticism, for this was the framework in which the novel was written. Edna's spiritual awakening causes her to become more and more selfish throughout the novel, a characteristic which most likely disturbs post-Romantic, twenty-first-century readers. However, Chopin is merely taking solipsistic Romantic thought and applying it to a woman instead of a man. To her turn-of-the-twentieth-century audience, daring to apply such ideas to a woman was scandalous because women were defined as domestic and self-effacing. Men could selfishly pursue spiritual awakening all they wanted, and it was viewed as a great human achievement, but women had duties to their children and their husbands. Chopin exposes this double standard by creating a character who is not only a woman but also a mother of two boys, and who then goes through a spiritual awakening with as little regard to her domestic duty as if she were a man. Going back to the priorities of Romantic solipsism, personal spiritual growth was viewed as much more valuable than any mundane social commitment. Chopin sees the distinction between men and woman as arbitrary on this matter, and so has Edna abandon her domestic responsibilities to achieve the culmination of her spiritual liberation. Romanticism, when applied to women, is therefore contrary to the angel in the house ideology, and this is very evident in Edna, who is portrayed as opposite an angel in the house in many ways and also given Romantic aspirations.



## Kate Chopin: Edna, an Emersonian Woman

*"By all the codes which I am acquainted with*

*I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex.*

*But some way I can't convince myself that I am."*

-- The Awakening, p. 79

### **"NOT A MOTHER-WOMAN"**

\* \* \* \* \*

From the very beginning of *The Awakening*, we understand that Edna is different from the angel in the house stereotype. Chopin's initial description of Edna conveys an almost masculine image: "Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her eyes. She was rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features" (5). Not long after, Adèle Ratignolle warns Robert, "'She is not one of us; she is not like us,'" (20). Referring to Robert's flirtations with Edna, Adèle continues, "'She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously'" (20). Throughout the novel, it is clear that Edna is not the typical nineteenth-century woman, and this excuse is made for her neglect of her duties as a wife and mother: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (9).



Edna's clash with the angel in the house ideology extends beyond mere neglect. She is also an openly sexual being, whereas angels were supposed to be "pure," referring back to one of the four characteristics Barbara Welter named. In other words, angels were supposed to be asexual. Edna's sexuality cannot be contained, however. It is overflowing at every moment, and it becomes stronger and more explicit as the novel progresses. Her very appearance exudes sexuality: "The charm of Edna Pontellier's physique stole insensibly upon you. The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it" (15). This is in stark contrast to the description of Adèle: "There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them" (9). With words like "flaming and apparent," the description of Adèle may appear wanton. But the same logic is applied here as with chastity in Creole women: "Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her [Edna], though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems inborn and unmistakable" (10). That which is obvious and in plain sight need not arouse concern. It is the subtlety that causes alarm. Edna is inherently sexual because her beauty has a sneaky quality about it, manifesting itself to men without their conscious recognition.

Edna's sexuality is also represented in the image of the sea:



The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (14)

This passage, repeated in part in the scene of Edna's suicide, describes the inner stirrings of Edna's desire, which are sea-like in their surges and lulls:

There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day. ...

There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why, – when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation. She could not work on such a day, nor weave fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood. (56)

Her desire does not merely mimic the tides of the sea; it also can be stirred by the sound or the memory of the sea: "She could hear again the ripple of the water, the flapping sail. She could see the glint of the moon upon the bay, and could feel the soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind. A subtle current of desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn" (55-56). Clearly Edna's sexuality is perpetually present. It cannot be contained any more than the sea can be contained. The



immensity of the sea connects it with the sublime, and Edna's preference for great spiritual and sexual awakening over a content yet mundane existence demonstrates her Romantic preference for the sublime. As such a constant and indomitable presence, Edna's sexuality strongly subverts the angel in the house stereotype.

### PATRIARCHY AND POSSESSION

\* \* \* \* \*

The reaction against the angel in the house ideology goes along with Chopin's critique of patriarchy in *The Awakening*. Patriarchy in this work is not portrayed as vicious, as in *Wuthering Heights*, but Chopin still aggressively attacks it. Chopin's primary argument regarding patriarchy is that even in its most benevolent form, patriarchy is unacceptable because at its root it defines women as less human than men, with fewer rights and not as full an existence. Mr. Pontellier represents the most benevolent possible form of patriarchy, which Chopin illustrates in her description of his sending Edna bonbons: "And the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better" (9). However, even Mr. Pontellier treats Edna as subhuman, albeit unintentionally. When he sees that she has been bathing all day in the hot sun, he exclaims, "'You are burnt beyond recognition,' ... looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (4). Mr. Pontellier's degrading view of his wife is not explicit or even conscious, but it is nonetheless there because a hierarchical status is inherent in patriarchy.



Chopin critiques patriarchy through Edna's defiance. In a less severe example of Mr. Pontellier's degrading view of his wife, he asks her to come in the house when he sees her outside late and in the chilly air. Mr. Pontellier becomes quite upset when Edna refuses this simple request. His request is centered on logic and concern for her well being, but at the root, Mr. Pontellier is disturbed that Edna will not obey him, so his request still degrades her in the sense that he believes Edna should prefer his judgement to her own. What first was a request, with refusal becomes a demand: "'This is no more than folly,' he blurted out. 'I can't permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly'" (31). Edna, however, simply refuses patriarchal precedent to govern her actions. She responds, "'Léonce, go to bed.... I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you'" (31). Edna adopts Emersonian independence and self-reliance here. She subverts patriarchy simply by refusing to believe it ought to govern her. However, unable to accept defeat, Mr. Pontellier continues to fidget around as long as Edna is outside. Finally, Edna decides to go inside of her own accord, at which point she says, "'Are you coiming [sic] in, Léonce?'" (31). Mr. Pontellier at this point has completely lost the battle. He has no option but to accept defeat: "'Yes dear,' he answered, with a glance following a misty puff of smoke. 'Just as soon as I have finished my cigar'" (31). So Edna does not merely refuse to allow her husband to hold authority over her; she in fact reverses the power balance so that she holds authority over him.



# AWAKENING FROM CHRISTIANITY

\* \* \* \* \*

Edna's rebellion is not against patriarchy alone; the novel also exhibits a critique of Christianity, like *Wuthering Heights*. Although Edna comes from a staunch Presbyterian background, she lets that influence her behavior less and less through the course of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, for example, Edna notes the "entire absence of prudery" in Creole women:

Never would Edna Pontellier forget the shock with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her *accouchements*, withholding no intimate detail. She was growing accustomed to like shocks, but she could not keep the mounting color back from her cheeks. (10-11)

Another example that demonstrates Edna's conservative upbringing is when a book circulates among her friends at Grand Isle: "When it came her turn to read it, she did so with profound astonishment. She felt moved to read the book in secret and solitude, though none of the others had done so—to hide it from view at the sound of approaching footsteps" (11). At this point Edna is reacting in the manner that she was taught to react as a child.

The influence of Edna's "sound old Presbyterian Kentucky stock," however, clearly diminishes as the novels progresses. When she realizes that Robert purposely has been keeping away from her after his return from Mexico, she addresses him thus:

'You are the embodiment of selfishness.... You save yourself something—I don't know what—but there is some selfish motive, and in sparing yourself you never consider for a moment what I think, or how I



feel your neglect and indifference. I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself. It doesn't matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like.' (100)

At this point in the novel, Edna has “got into a habit of expressing myself.” Here again she exhibits her Emersonian independence. She cares not that her behavior is perceived as unwomanly, demonstrating that she has separated herself from her modest Presbyterian upbringing. Earlier in the novel, she acknowledges this separation more explicitly: ““By all codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am”” (79). Edna is referring to the angel in the house ideology, so perfectly exemplified in her friend Adèle, but so far from her own personality. At this point Edna realizes, if only implicitly, that her conservative upbringing has been causing her to shy away from her true self-expression, calling such behavior wicked. But she finally begins to realize that who she is is not wicked at all, and so abandons the earlier notions instilled in her. In good Emersonian fashion, she abandons convention and embraces her true self, no longer thinking that wicked simply because it is different.

A more blatant critique of Christianity occurs when Edna attends church with Robert, at the beginning of her awakening:

A feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service. Her head began to ache, and the lights on the altar swayed before her eyes. Another time she might have made an effort to regain her composure; but her one thought was to quit the stifling atmosphere of the church and reach the open air. (34-35)



The words “oppression” and “stifling atmosphere” clearly indicate a critique of the stifling conformity and submission upheld by the church. Although the service Edna attends is a Catholic service, nothing in the novel indicates that Chopin’s critique is directed specifically at Catholicism. Moreover, the passage refers to a general “service” and “church,” without the Catholic denomination being mentioned anywhere. The emphasis of the critique in this passage is on the stifling nature of a religious service in general, not on the fact that the service happens to be Catholic. Chopin writes that “[a]nother time she might have made an effort to regain her composure.” That time, now past, was back when Edna’s Presbyterian upbringing encouraged modest, conforming behavior, the same behavior that led her to accept a marriage proposal from a man she didn’t love. Edna’s awakening into a liberated individual requires freedom from the “stifling atmosphere” of Christianity, as well. Since the angel of the house definition is so closely related to Christian piety, Edna’s dismissal of Christianity is also dismissal of the angel in the house stereotype.

### INTERPRETING EDNA’S SUICIDE

\* \* \* \* \*

Edna’s character can be difficult to justify because of the neglect she exhibits particularly toward her children. Edna’s increasing tendency to think only of herself seems inherently offensive to us on account of her children. Chopin succeeds in getting us to dismiss any duty Edna owes to Léonce, since he has demonstrated that although he is very kind to Edna he views her as a piece of property. However, Raoul and Etienne bear no responsibility in Edna’s unfavorable position in life, and she is in fact partly responsible for having children in the first place. We perhaps expect Edna not to indulge



so fully in her selfish pursuit of greater self-knowledge, in the interest of ensuring that her children grow up healthy, properly raised, and with the knowledge that their mother loves them. However, this is precisely what Edna argues she does not owe her children. “‘I would give up the unessential,’” she explains to Madame Ratignolle; “‘I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself’” (46). Here Edna is referring to the Romantic Self, with Godlike creative capacity. She allows that she owes her children every advantage, but she insists that the fact that she is a mother should not limit her from achieving the fullest possible spiritual growth. Motherhood should not transform her into a subhuman being, undeserving of pursuing her full spiritual potential.

Edna’s suicide at the end of the novel may also be difficult to justify. On a practical plane, she appears to be abandoning her responsibilities to her children, to her husband, and to society in general, simply because she does not wish to confront the mundane nature of everyday existence after such intense spiritual awakening. We may wish to inform Edna that one cannot live with her head in the clouds all the time. There are certain worldly tasks that, while unpleasant, must nonetheless be accomplished.

However, a proper reading of Edna’s suicide depends on a close attention to the language in the final passage:

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. ... She did not look back now, but went on and on.... Her arms and legs were growing tired. ... ‘Good-by—because I love you.’ He did not know; he did not understand. Perhaps



Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him—but it was too late, the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone. (109)

One important thing to realize is that Edna does not consciously decide to commit suicide. She simply swims out until she is too far out and too tired to return. This itself, then, is a metaphor. Edna's spirit has awakened too far for her to return to mundane existence, which is her reason for swimming out to sea in the first place. The sea represents Edna's sexual freedom, and her swimming out into its oblivion is her embracing the sublime and embracing the part of herself that has awakened. Her suicide, then, is not best read on a literal level. It represents Edna's choice to preserve and continue her spiritual and sexual liberation, rather than submit to the mundane world. Edna's leaving her children motherless does not factor into her suicide on this level. She is instead asserting that they do not have the right to own her completely and prevent her spiritual growth. Edna even thinks of this right before her death: "She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (109). The key word is soul. Edna feels the ties of duty to her family in material ways, but she will not allow her socially prescribed role as a wife and mother limit her spiritual growth.

"Edna's suicide has been seen as both a failure and a triumph," writes Priscilla Leder, "because Edna fails to create a satisfying new life for herself even as she succeeds in escaping the restrictions of her old life" (248). Some, such as Judith Fryer, see the novel's ending as entirely triumphant, the culmination of Edna's awakening. Joyce Dyer, however, argues that Fryer is "too generous in her assessment of Edna":



There is no question that Edna Pontillier falls short of being and doing all that she might have. ... In many ways she is truly unborn, unawakened. We could even argue that she is still, to some extent, a version of the parrot that announces Chopin's text. She has escaped her cage and chosen to stop imitating those around her, but she has been unable to discover what she will do instead. She does not buy brushes and canvas and head for Paris. As Virginia Kouidis notes, Edna the artist does not fully exploit the Emersonian legacy to creativity implicit in the novel's pages, the legacy of 'colored subjective vision' and 'unresolved perception'...."

(115)

Dyer makes valid points regarding the ending of Chopin's novel. Feminist readers will likely wish to see Edna actively pursue some path, affirming her independence and her right to her own life. However, I believe Chopin purposely left the ending of the novel open. It is imperative not to read the ending literally. Indeed, Dyer notes that a Romantic reading of the ending must not be literal: "[I]f we are to believe Emerson's assertion in 'Self-Reliance' that 'imitation is suicide' (1841, 259), we might fight still another argument for a more helpful view of things: since Edna, by walking into the sea, refuses imitation, her gesture must be seen within the romantic tradition as something other than suicide" (114). Dyer's observation is clever, but if Edna's walking out to sea is something other than suicide, what, we may ask, is it?

Edna is clearly refusing imitation, but she is also not choosing any specific direction. We who live in a world that depends on the ability to make difficult choices may tend to read Edna's lack of direction as negative, but it can also be read in a positive



light. There is no one path that Edna should choose. The novel concludes at the point when all Edna's options are open. Dyer concurs with this point:

*The Awakening* is a metaphor of possibility and potential rather than a didactic guidebook for the twentieth century, or for its writers. ... Like her name ('Pontellier,' as Wendy Martin observes, means 'one who bridges' [25]), Edna herself is one whose mission is to begin the painful process of bridging two centuries, two worlds, two visions of gender. So appropriate as a turn-of-the-century piece, *The Awakening* is about the beginning of selfhood, not its completion. (116)

The importance lies in the possibilities. Chopin specifically avoids giving Edna a set direction. To do so would be to close off other paths, when the true thrust of the novel is in the opening of paths. Edna begins the novel confined and without options in her role as a wife and mother, so it is only appropriate that she end the novel in the opposite scenario: where no paths are closed. In real life, one path must be chosen, but assigning Edna one path out of all her possibilities would be to give false closure. For even once a person chooses a path, it is only a beginning; there is still much more growing and awakening to be done. Chopin therefore deprives us of the illusion of closure. She provides us only with the awakening and the opening of possibilities.



## Conclusion

From the conservative Jane Austen to the radical Emily Brontë and Kate Chopin, women writers in the nineteenth century employed various techniques to critique women's social station. The early serious critics, among them Austen and Fern, tried to suggest improvements without greatly upsetting the status quo. They were interested in practical solutions rather than complete ones. However, subsequent women writers found their critiques to be incomplete, and thus wrote more and more controversial novels. With so far to go, radical critics such as Emily Brontë and Kate Chopin moved away from presenting a workable solution within the text, as that would close down possibilities. They still rose issues where material liberation was required but concentrated more on achieving spiritual liberation within the text, something that women readers could hope to emulate within their lifetime.

Intellectual, material, and spiritual liberation are all loosely connected. Intellectual liberation, on which Austen concentrated, implies political changes, for if women are the intellectual equals of men, then they ought to have the same legal status and rights. Political changes are an aspect of material liberation. And spiritual liberation aims to give women the strength and inspiration to work toward material changes despite the long uphill road. Spiritual and intellectual liberation are connected in that they are concerned with women's interior growth instead of merely external changes. Intellectual liberation focuses on that growth in an Enlightenment context, where women become rational agents participating equally with men in social discourse. Spiritual liberation, on



the other hand, places the growth in a Romantic context. As such, the growth that a heroine achieves in a novel may seem to move contrary to material liberation, such as in *The Awakening*. Due to the complex symbolic techniques that Romantic writers employed, their novels often require a flexible and non-literal interpretation to remain consistent or to be read as a successful critique. However, this should not be viewed as a diminishing aspect of these authors' critiques because they often employ the complex techniques as a way of moving beyond current critiques. Symbolism especially was employed to critiques of a controversial nature that might not be read otherwise, or that might bring personal attacks upon the author. A work must be read in order to have an impact, so aspects that seem to cloud or diminish a critique may in fact make it more powerful for the time in which it was written.

Throughout the nineteenth century, women writers clearly saw their socially defined space to be too small for their potential as human beings. The home was such a sacred space in the nineteenth century—a center of stability amid all the religious, economic, scientific, and technological chaos in the world—that the patriarchs severely restricted the space in a desperate attempt to maintain their one last stronghold. But women were growing too much to be kept in their domestic space, and the lie that said an angel belonged in a cage was being debunked. Women writers exposed the contradictions in the nineteenth-century social definitions so that women could aspire to be something greater than an angel living somewhere other than a cage.



## Bibliography

- Austen, Jane. Pride and Prejudice. Ed. Vivien Jones. London: Penguin, 1996.
- - -. Mansfield Park. Ed. John Lucas. James Kinsley, Textual Notes and Bibliography. London: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Baym, Nina. Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870. Urbana: Illinois UP, 1993.
- Brians, Paul. "The Enlightenment." Washington State University. 18 May 2000. 21 February 2004.  
<[http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/hum\\_303/enlightenment.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/hum_303/enlightenment.html)>.
- - -. "Romanticism." Washington State University. 21 September 2000. 11 March 2004.  
<[http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/hum\\_303/romanticism.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/hum_303/romanticism.html)>.
- Brontë, Charlotte. Jane Eyre. Ed. Michael Mason. London: Penguin, 1996.
- Brontë, Emily. Wuthering Heights. Ed. Ian Jack. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Harvard Classics. Vol 24, Part 2. New York: P.F. Collier, 1909-14.  
Bartleby.com. 2001. 12 March 2004. <<http://www.bartleby.com/24/2/>>.
- Chopin, Kate. The Awakening. Ed. Margo Culley. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Colemanscurry, Piper S. Ralph Waldo Emerson's Self-Reliance. 27 March 2004.  
<<http://www.wcenter.spelman.edu/English323/colemanscurry/emmy.html>>.
- Cranston, Maurice. The Romantic Movement. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- "Deism Defined." World Union of Deists. 22 February 2004.  
<[http://www.deism.com/deism\\_defined.htm](http://www.deism.com/deism_defined.htm)>.



- Duff, David. "From Revolution to Romanticism: The Historical Context to 1800." A Companion to Romanticism. Ed. Duncan Wu. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. 23-34.
- Dyer, Joyce. The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings. New York: Twayne, 1993.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature." Ralph Waldo Emerson – Texts. Ed. Jone Johnson Lewis. From Addresses, part of Nature: Addresses and Lectures. 27 March 2004. <<http://www.emersoncentral.com/nature1.htm>>.
- - -. "Self-Reliance." Ralph Waldo Emerson – Texts. Ed. Jone Johnson Lewis. From Essays: First Series. 1841. 27 March 2004. <<http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm>>.
- Fern, Fanny. Ruth Hall. Ed. Margo Culley. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Himma, Kenneth Einar. "Natural Law." The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2001. 21 February 2004. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/n/natlaw.htm>>.
- Kelly, Gary. "Romantic Fiction." The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism. Ed. Stuart Curran. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. 196-215.
- Kinsley, James. "Note on the Text." Mansfield Park, by Jane Austen. Ed. John Lucas. London: Oxford UP, 1970. xix.
- Kirkham, Margaret. Jane Austen, Feminism, and Fiction. New York: Methuen, 1986.
- Koppel, Gene. The Religious Dimension of Jane Austen's Novels. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988.
- Kucich, John. Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens. Berkeley: California UP, 1987.



Leder, Priscilla. "Land's End: *The Awakening* and 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Literary Tradition."

Critical Essays on Kate Chopin. Ed. Alice Hall Petry. New York: G. K. Hall, 1996. 237-250.

Massé, Michelle A. In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.

Poovey, Mary. The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984.

- - -. Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988.

Ross, Deborah. The Excellence of Falsehood: Romance, Realism, and Women's Contribution to the Novel. Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1991.

Salotto, Eleanor. ENGL 274: The English Novel II. Class Notes. 14 January 2003.

- - -. ENGL 104: Major British Writers II. Class Notes. 11 March 2002.

Showalter, Elaine. The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

Steward, Maaja A. Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts. Athens: Georgia UP, 1993.

Thormählen, Marianne. The Brontës and Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Thornton, Stephen. "Solipsism and the Problem of Other Minds." The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2001. 27 March 2004.

<<http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/solipsis.htm>>.



Tolley, Michael J. "Preromanticism." A Companion to Romanticism. Ed. Duncan Wu.

Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. 12-22.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood." Dimity Convictions: The American

Woman in the Nineteenth Century. Athens: Ohio UP, 1976. 21-41.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. Rights of Woman. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1929.

Wu, Duncan, ed. A Companion to Romanticism. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

6659 3277 1

07/19/04

MFB









